

**THE DUST OF
CONFLICT**

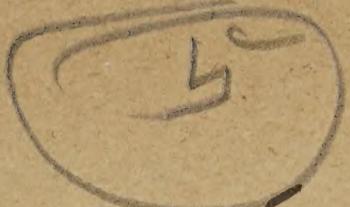
By HAROLD BINDLOSS



+22

1-25

21



Mrs Geo. C. Watson

mar

No. 168

THE DUST OF CONFLICT





© 1907 by Frederick Stokes Company

"I AM, YOU WILL REMEMBER, AN ADVENTURER."—Page 120.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

By HAROLD BINDLOSS
AUTHOR OF "ALTON OF SOMASCO,"
"THE CATTLE-BARON'S DAUGHTER," ETC.

With illustrations in color by
W. HERBERT DUNTON



TORONTO · MCLEOD & ALLEN

COPYRIGHT, 1907,
BY FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY

Published in January, 1907

All rights reserved

THE UNIVERSITY PRESS, CAMBRIDGE, U.S.A.

CONTENTS

| CHAPTER | PAGE |
|--|------|
| I. VIOLET WAYNE'S CONFIDENCE | I |
| II. DAVIDSON MEETS HIS MATCH | II |
| III. TONY CANNOT DECIDE | 22 |
| IV. THE VERDICT | 32 |
| V. APPLEBY MAKES A FRIEND | 41 |
| VI. THE SCHOONER "VENTURA" | 51 |
| VII. THE DESCENT OF SANTA MARTA | 61 |
| VIII. APPLEBY'S PRISONER | 71 |
| IX. THE BREAKING OF THE NET | 84 |
| X. AN UNEXPECTED MEETING | 92 |
| XI. THE ALCALDE'S BALL | 103 |
| XII. PANCHO'S WARNING | 113 |
| XIII. THE SECOND ATTEMPT | 123 |
| XIV. APPLEBY PROVES OBDURATE | 131 |
| XV. TONY'S LAST OPPORTUNITY | 141 |
| XVI. DANE COP | 150 |
| XVII. TONY IS PAINFULLY ASTONISHED | 159 |
| XVIII. NETTIE ASKS A QUESTION | 169 |
| XIX. POSITIVE PROOF | 177 |
| XX. FOUND GUILTY | 186 |
| XXI. TONY'S DECISION | 195 |
| XXII. MORALES MAKES A PROPOSAL | 203 |

CONTENTS

| CHAPTER | PAGE |
|--|------|
| XXIII. APPLEBY TAKES A RISK | 213 |
| XXIV. RESPITED | 223 |
| XXV. MORALES SITS STILL | 232 |
| XXVI. THE SEIZING OF SAN CRISTOVAL | 242 |
| XXVII. HARDING'S APPROBATION | 251 |
| XXVIII. TONY MAKES AMENDS | 259 |
| XXIX. TONY PERSISTS | 267 |
| XXX. MORALES PRESERVES HIS FAME | 275 |
| XXXI. STRUCK OFF THE ROLL | 285 |
| XXXII. APPLEBY LEAVES SANTA MARTA | 295 |
| XXXIII. VIOLET REGAINS HER LIBERTY | 305 |
| XXXIV. THE RIGHT MAN | 313 |

The Dust of Conflict

I

VIOLET WAYNE'S CONFIDENCE

THE November afternoon was drawing towards its close when Bernard Appleby stood with a gun on his shoulder in an English country lane. It was a costly hammerless gun, but it had been lent to him, and the fact that his right shoulder was sore and there was a raw place on one of his fingers was not without its significance. Appleby, indeed, seldom enjoyed an opportunity of shooting pheasants, and had been stationed at what proved to be a particularly warm corner of the big beech wood. Here he had, however, acquitted himself considerably better than might have been expected, for he had a steady eye and the faculty of making a quick and usually accurate decision, as well as a curious coolness in action, which was otherwise somewhat at variance with an impulsive disposition. These qualities are useful in more serious affairs than game shooting, and it was fortunate for Appleby, who was a poor man, that he possessed them, because they comprised his whole worldly advantages.

A little farther up the lane his kinsman, Anthony Palliser, was talking to a keeper, and though Appleby could not hear what they said, there was something in the man's manner which puzzled him. It was certainly not respectful, and Appleby could almost have fancied that he was threatening his companion. This, however, appeared improbable, for Anthony Palliser was a man of some little importance in that part of the country, and endowed with an indolent good humor which had gained him the good will of everybody. Still, Appleby had seen that complaisance can be carried too far, and knowing rather better than most people how little

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

stiffness there was in Palliser's character, watched him somewhat curiously until the keeper moved away.

Then Palliser came up and joined him, and they turned homewards down the lane. They were not unlike in appearance, and of much the same age — Appleby twenty-six, Palliser a year younger. Both were healthy young Englishmen, but there was an indefinite something in the poise of Appleby's head, and the very way he put his feet down, which suggested who possessed the most character. He had clear blue eyes which met one fearlessly, and into which there crept at times a little reckless twinkle, crisp brown hair, and lips which could set firmly together, while he held himself well, considering that he labored for the most part at a desk.

"What do you think of keeper Davidson?" asked Palliser.

"A surly brute!" said Appleby. "Ill-conditioned, but tenacious. Have you any reason for asking?"

He fancied for a moment that Palliser had something to tell him, but the younger man smiled somewhat mirthlessly. "I don't like the fellow, and wonder why my respected uncle tolerates him," he said. "He is certainly tenacious. You have a trick of weighing up folks correctly, Bernard."

"It is fortunate I have some qualification for my profession, and it's about the only one," said Appleby dryly. "Still, it did not need much penetration to see that you and he held different opinions."

Palliser appeared irresolute. "The fact is, he would have the netting put up in the wrong place, and spoiled what should have been our best drive," he said. "It was by his bad management they had to put two of the game hampers in the dog-cart, which sent us home on foot. I hope you don't mind that. It's a pleasant evening for walking, and you know you don't get much exercise."

"Not in the least!" said Appleby. "Don't make excuses, Tony. It is n't everybody who would have walked home with me, and it was very good of you to persuade Godfrey Palliser to have me down at all. It is the only taste I get of this kind of thing — one fortnight in the year, you see — and I'm considerably fonder of it than is good for me."

Palliser flushed a trifle, for he was sympathetic and somewhat sensitive, though his comrade had intended to express no bitterness. By and by he stopped where the lane wound

VIOLET WAYNE'S CONFIDENCE

over the crest of a hill, and it was possible that each guessed the other's thoughts as they looked down into the valley.

A beech wood with silver firs in it rolled down the face of the hill, and the maze of leafless twigs and dusky spires cut sharp against the soft blueness of the evening sky, though warm hues of russet and crimson still chequered the dusky green below. Beyond it, belts of thin white mist streaked the brown plough land in the hollow where Appleby could see the pale shining of a winding river. Across that in turn, meadow and coppice rolled away past the white walls of a village bowered in orchards, and faded into the creeping night beyond a dim church tower and the dusky outline of Northrop Hall. As they watched, its long row of windows twinkled into brilliancy, and the sound of running water came up with the faint astringent smell of withered leaves out of the hollow. Appleby drew in a deep breath, and his face grew a trifle grim.

"And all that will be yours some day, Tony!" he said.
"You ought to feel yourself a lucky man."

Palliser did not appear enthusiastic. "There are," he said, "always drawbacks, and when there are none one generally makes them. The place is over head and heels in debt, and setting anything straight, especially if it entailed retrenchment, was never a favorite occupation of mine. Besides, a good deal depends upon my pleasing Godfrey Palliser, and there are times when it's a trifle difficult to get on with him."

"Still, your wife will have plenty of money."

Appleby almost fancied that Palliser winced as they turned away. "Yes," he said. "Violet and I are, however, not married yet, and we'll talk of something else. Are you liking the business any better?"

Appleby laughed. "I never liked it in the least, but Godfrey Palliser gave me my education, which was rather more than anybody could have expected of him, and I had the sense to see that if I was ever able to practise for myself the business he could influence would be a good thing for me. My worthy employer, however, evidently intends holding on forever, and the sordid, monotonous drudgery has been getting insupportable lately. You may be able to understand that, though you have n't spent six years in a country solicitor's office."

"No," said Palliser sympathetically. "I never go into

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

such places except when I want money, as I frequently do. Still, is there anything else open to you?"

Appleby straightened his shoulders with a little resolute gesture, and — for they were heading west — pointed vaguely towards the pale evening star.

"There are still lands out there where they want men who can ride and shoot, and take their chances as they come; while if I was born to be anything in particular it was either a jockey or a soldier."

Palliser nodded. "Yes," he said, "you got it from both sides, and it was rather a grim joke to make you a solicitor. Still, it's a risky thing to throw one's living over, and I have a fancy that my uncle likes you. You are a connection, anyway, and one never knows what may happen."

"Godfrey Palliser has done all he means to do for me, and even if there were nobody else, your children would have a prior claim, Tony."

Palliser looked up sharply, and though the light was very dim there was something in his face that once more puzzled his companion. "I think that is a little personal — and I would n't make too sure," he said.

They said nothing further, but tramped on in the growing darkness, past farm steadings where the sleek cattle flocked about the byres, into the little village where the smell of wood smoke was in the frosty air, through the silent churchyard where generations of the Pallisers lay, and up the beech avenue that led to Northrop Hall. It would, as Appleby had said, all be his comrade's some day. They parted at the head of the great stairway where the long corridors branched off, and Appleby looked at Palliser steadily as he said —

"One could fancy there was something on your mind tonight, Tony."

Palliser did not answer, and Appleby went to his room to dress for dinner, which was a somewhat unusual proceeding for him. Nothing of moment occurred during the meal, and it was nobody's fault that he felt not quite at home, as he had done at other functions of the kind. The gayeties of the Metropolis were unknown, except by hearsay, to him, and it was but once a year he met Tony's friends at Northrop Hall. It was, however, not quite by coincidence, as he at first fancied, that he afterwards found Miss Violet Wayne, Tony's fiancée,

VIOLET WAYNE'S CONFIDENCE

sitting a little apart from the rest in the drawing-room. He did not think that either of them suggested it, but presently she was walking by his side in the conservatory, and when they passed a seat almost hidden under the fronds of a tree fern she sat down in it. The place was dimly lighted, but they could see each other, and Appleby had realized already that Violet Wayne was distinctly good to look upon.

Her face was almost severely regular in outline and feature, with but the faintest warmth in its creamy tinting; but this was atoned for by the rich coloring of her hair, which gleamed with the hues of gold and burnished copper. There was also a curious reposefulness about her, and Appleby had wondered why a young woman of her distinction had displayed the kindness she had more than once done to him. He was grateful for it, but what he had seen of men and women during his legal training had made him shrewd.

"This place is pleasantly cool and green, but I am not sure that is why we are here," he said. "In any case, I am glad, because I am going away to-morrow, and wished to thank you for your graciousness to me. I am, as, of course, you know, an outsider here, and you have in several tactful ways made my stay pleasant to me."

Violet Wayne looked at him with big calm eyes, but made no disclaimer. "You are a relative of Godfrey Palliser!"

"A distant one; but my mother married a penniless army captain, and a ranker. He had won his commission by worth and valor, but that was no reason why the Pallisers should hold out a hand to him."

Violet Wayne nodded gravely. "Still, Godfrey Palliser sent you to school with Tony. You were always good friends, though I think he told me you were born abroad?"

"Yes," said Appleby, "he was my first English friend. My father died at Gibraltar, and my mother stayed on there until she followed him. She did not want to forget him, and living is cheap in Spain. Tony and I fought our way through three schools together."

"I think it was you who fought for him," said Miss Wayne, with a little smile. "He has, I may mention, told me a good deal about you, and that is one reason why I feel that I could trust you. You would, I believe, respect any confidence a woman reposed in you."

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

Appleby flushed a trifle. "I fancy I told you I was grateful," he said. "The little kindnesses you have shown me mean so much to a man whose life is what mine has been. One gets very few of them, you see."

"Still," the girl said quietly, "when we first met you were not quite sure of me."

The color showed a trifle plainer in Appleby's forehead, for he had not had the advantages of his companion's training, but he looked at her with steady eyes. "You can set that down as due to the pride of the class I sprang from on one side—I feared a rebuff which would have hurt me. I was, you will remember, Tony's friend long before he met you!"

"And now?"

Appleby made her a little inclination. "Tony," he said, "is a very good fellow, as men go, but I do not know that he is good enough for you."

Violet Wayne smiled and then sat still, looking at him with a curious softness in her eyes. "He is in trouble," she said simply, "and I am fond of him. That is why I have led you on."

Appleby rose, and there was a suggestion of resolute alertness in his attitude, though his head was bent. "Don't ask me for any help that I can give. Let me offer it," he said. "I don't know that I am expressing myself fittingly, but it is not only because you will be Tony's wife that you can command whatever little I can do."

The girl saw his lips set and the glint in his eyes, and knew he meant what he said. She also saw his chivalrous respect for herself, and, being a young woman of keen perceptions, also surmised that the son of the ranker possessed certain qualities which were lacking in the man she was to marry. She was, as she had admitted, fond of Tony, but most of those who knew and liked him guessed that he was unstable and weak as water. Violet Wayne had, however, in spite of occasional misgivings, not quite realized that fact yet.

"I want you to help him because you are his friend—and mine, but it would hurt him if you told him that I had asked you to; and I do not even know what the trouble is," she said.

"I have pledged myself; but if you have failed to discover it how can I expect to succeed?"

Violet Wayne did not look at him this time. "There are

VIOLET WAYNE'S CONFIDENCE

some difficulties a man would rather tell his comrade than the woman who is to be his wife."

"I think, if I understand you aright, that you are completely and wholly mistaken. If Tony is in any difficulty, it will be his usual one, the want of money."

A tinge of color crept into the girl's face. "Then you will lend it him and come to me. I have plenty."

She rose as she spoke, and Appleby long afterwards remembered the picture she made as she stood amidst the tall ferns with the faint warmth in her face and the vague anxiety in her eyes. She was tall, and held herself well, and once more he bent his head a trifle.

"I will do what I can," he said simply.

Violet Wayne left him, but she had seen his face, and felt that whatever it cost him the man would redeem his pledge; while Appleby, who went outside to smoke, paced thoughtfully up and down the terrace.

"If Tony has gone off the line in the usual direction he deserves to be shot," he said.

He went in by and by, and watched his comrade in the billiard room. Tony was good at most games, but that night he bungled over some of the simplest cannons, though Appleby remembered that he had shot remarkably well during the afternoon. Still, he expected no opportunity of speaking to him alone until the morning, and when the rest took up their candles retired to his room. He lay in a big chair thinking, when Tony came in and flung himself into another. Appleby noticed that his face was almost haggard.

"Can you lend me ten pounds?" he said.

"No," said Appleby dryly. "I had to venture an odd stake now and then, and do not play billiards well, while I am now in possession of about three sovereigns over my railway fare home to-morrow. What do you want the money for?"

"I only want it until the bank at Darsley opens to-morrow. This is my uncle's house, of course, but I am, so to speak, running it for him, and I could n't well go round borrowing from the men I asked to stay with me."

"It seems to me that you have not answered my question."

Tony showed more than a trace of embarrassment. He was, though a personable man, somewhat youthful in appearance and manner, and a little color crept into his forehead.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

Appleby, who remembered his promise, saw his discomposure, and decided that as the bank would be open at ten on the morrow Tony wanted the money urgently that night.

"Is there any reason why I should?" said the latter.

Appleby nodded. "I think there is," he said. "We have been friends a long while, and it seems to me quite reasonable that I should want to help you. You are in a hole, Tony."

Palliser had not meant to make a confession, but he was afraid and weak, and Appleby was strong. "I am. It's a devilishly deep one, and I can't get out," he said. "Well, I'll tell you. I'm in that condemned Davidson the keeper's hands, and he is squeezing the life out of me. You will remember his daughter Lucy, who lived at the lodge?"

"Blackmail!" said Appleby dryly. "Go on."

Tony took out and played with a cigar. "She was pretty, and you know I was always a trifle soft. Now and then I stopped as I passed, and talked to her. I don't think she disliked it. Well, I don't remember exactly how it came about, but I made her a trifling wager, and, of course, I lost it; while some fiend put it into my head to send her a little brooch, with a note, instead of the forfeit agreed on — I think it was a box of chocolate. I was away for a week or two, and when I came back she told me she didn't think she ought to take anything of that kind from me. There was nobody about the lodge — at least so I fancied — and I insisted upon putting the condemned thing on. I think I told you she was pretty."

"I have seen it for myself," said Appleby, whose face was a picture of disgust. "Go on!"

"Well," said Tony, "why the devil are you looking like that at me? I wasn't engaged to Violet then, and I kissed her — and went away immediately. It is necessary that you should know this, you see."

Perhaps it was relief, for his comrade was more truthful than weak men usually are, but Appleby lapsed into a great burst of laughter. Tony, however, looked at him lugubriously.

"It really isn't in the least amusing — to me," he said. "It's an especially risky business kissing that kind of young woman, especially when anybody sees you. Still, I'd seen something in the girl's face that warned me, and on my word of honor the affair ended there; but in a week or two, when

VIOLET WAYNE'S CONFIDENCE

I did n't answer the note she sent, Davidson came and worried me. Talked about his feelings and a motherless girl's reputation, showed me the note I'd written her, and said a good deal about witnesses. Well — you know I'm careless — I gave him five pounds, a note, and then saw he had one of his men hanging about. 'Go down to the "Black Bull," and get this fiver Mr. Palliser has given me changed,' he said."

"Clever!" said Appleby. "I begin to understand the thing."

"Well," said Tony, "I never went near his place since then, and the girl went away, but soon after I was engaged to Violet, Davidson turned up again. This time it was a more serious tale — the usual one — but you have got to believe what I told you."

"Yes," said Appleby, "I think I can. You were often a fool, Tony, but that contented you."

"I gave him twenty pounds. If I'd had any sense I would have knocked him down instead; but it was an unpleasant story, and I was engaged to Violet. Godfrey Palliser was bent on the match too, though it was n't that which influenced me. Then Davidson commenced to come for money regularly, and I can't get out of the fact that I've been subsidizing him without perjury; while it's evident that if I told the truth now nobody would believe me. I tell you, Bernard, the thing has been worrying the life out of me."

This was apparent from his strained voice and the dejection in his face, but Appleby smiled reassuringly. "You should have gone to a lawyer long ago, Tony; but you can leave it to me," he said. "Davidson expects you to give him money to-night?"

"Yes. He makes me come out at midnight and meet him to show he holds the whip over me. Thirty pounds — and I can only raise twenty — at half-past eleven by the fir spinny! Have you the slightest hope of doing anything with him?"

Appleby nodded as he took out his watch. "I should n't wonder if I bring you good news to-morrow. Remember, you are to say nothing to anybody. Give me what money you have and then go to sleep. You look as if you needed it."

He took the notes Palliser handed him, and when he went away hung about the head of the stairway until Violet Wayne came up with a white-haired lady. He contrived to catch

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

her eye, and though she passed on with her companion within five minutes she came back again.

"Well?" she said expectantly.

Appleby smiled. "If you can let me have ten pounds and ask no questions I think it will be an excellent investment, though it is quite possible that I shall be able to hand you them back to-morrow," he said. "If I were a richer man I would not ask you."

The girl made a little gesture of impatience and flitted away, but in a few minutes she once more stood beside him, a trifle breathless, and there was a crisp rustle, as she slipped something into his hand.

"Thank you ever so much! When you can you will tell me," she said.

Appleby only nodded, and went down the stairway. He took a riding crop from the rack in the hall, and then passed through the drawing-room into the conservatory, the outer door of which was not fastened yet. He opened it noiselessly and slipped out into the night, taking the key with him; but, though he did not know this, a man who afterwards remembered it saw him and noticed that he carried the riding crop.

II

DAVIDSON MEETS HIS MATCH

IT was with confused feelings that Appleby, treading softly as he crossed the gravelled terrace, slipped into the gloom of a shrubbery. There was a trace of frost in the air, and the stars shone brightly, but here and there a thin white mist hung in filmy wisps. He was, however, conscious of an elation which had a curious bracing effect. Violet Wayne had trusted him with her confidence, and it was the first time a woman of her station had cast more than a passing glance on him. Her reposeful serenity, with its faint suggestion of imperiousness, had impressed him more than her beauty, and he was sensible of an unbounded respect and admiration for Tony's fiancée. Tony had also, in his indolent fashion, and perhaps because the favors he dispensed cost him nothing, been a good friend to him, which was, however, not astonishing, since Appleby had fought most of his battles for him and stood between him and the results of his easy-going carelessness at school. Tony Palliser was one of the men who need the guidance of a stronger hand, and usually obtain it.

Appleby had, however, affairs of his own to think of that night, and as he swung across a misty meadow the half-formed resolution which had been long in his mind took definite shape, and he decided he would not go back to the drudgery his soul detested. His father had risen by valor from the ranks, and the instincts he had stubbornly held in check at last asserted themselves dominantly. He remembered the sordid poverty, the struggle to maintain appearances, and the strain of forced attention to an uncongenial task, and asked himself half contemptuously why he had borne them so long. He had spent his early years in Spain, where he had been taught out of charity by an army chaplain, and had reckless brown-faced muleteers and smugglers and grave artillery

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

officers, the gatekeepers of the Mediterranean, for his friends, while the fortnight spent at Northrop had brought back old associations overwhelmingly.

It was, however, not the leisure and wealth and luxury which appealed to him — and indeed there was little of the latter at Northrop Hall — but the smell of the brown woods and the ringing of the guns. There were also the horses, for Appleby had learned to ride in Spain, the wide spaces he could gallop through with tingling blood, and the hours he had spent pitting every faculty against the wariness of the grayling in the stream. He felt he could never go back to the old colorless life again, and as he looked out into the dusky blueness under the stars and across the dim landscape which rolled away before him, silent, and wide, and shadowy, his courage rose. There was room, he felt, beyond the confines of English cities for men with thews and sinews who were willing to hew their own way to fortune out in the wind and sun.

He stopped for a few moments on a hillside and looked about him, while his heart throbbed faster. There was still a light or two in the hall behind him, but none in the village, and the earth lay asleep wrapped in fleecy draperies of drifting mist, while the low murmur of the river came out of the great stillness. He could see its pale blink where it slid out from the gloom of a wood, and above, across the stubble where the footpath led, a clump of rigid spires that rose black and solid against the faintly luminous night. That, he knew, was the fir spinny where he was to meet the blackmailer, and shaking all thought of his own affairs from him he went on quietly resolute to do battle for his friend. Appleby was an impulsive man, quick to decide; but there was also an obdurate persistency in him, and the decision once made was usually adhered to. Keeper Davidson was not to find an easy victim that night.

He stopped outside the spinny with the riding crop held, where it would not be seen, behind him, and a man who had been listening for his footsteps came out of it. It was unfortunate for him that he had spent most of the evening in the hostelry at the village, or he might have recognized the difference between them and Tony Palliser's reluctant tread. Appleby had come up with swift, resolute stride, as one who had a purpose, and meant to accomplish it.

DAVIDSON MEETS HIS MATCH

"Davidson?" he said, with a little ring in his voice, which was very unlike Tony's then.

The man stared at him. "It was Mr. Palliser I expected to see," he said.

"I have come in place of him, and don't think it likely that he will meet you here again," Appleby said dryly. "In fact, unless we can come to some arrangement, it is very probable that you will get a month's notice from Mr. Godfrey Palliser to-morrow."

Davidson laughed unpleasantly. "Mr. Tony tried that game before, and found it would n't pay. Now, you listen to me, though I'm not telling you anything you don't know. Mr. Tony has to marry money, and Miss Wayne is a particular young lady. They say he's fond of her, too; but if I thought it my duty to tell her the kind of man he is there'd be no more talk of that match."

"The trouble is that Miss Wayne would not believe you," said Appleby.

Now, though Appleby was not aware of this, Davidson had consumed a good deal of liquid refreshment that evening, or he might not have shown his hand so plainly. Nor did he know that Appleby had any connection with the legal profession.

"It would be easy convincing her when she saw his letter. I've got witnesses — and a certificate," he said.

The sullen anger in the last words would probably have caught Appleby's attention had he been an older man, and shown him that it was not avarice alone which prompted Davidson. As it happened, however, he did not notice it.

"That proves nothing," he said. "We do not dispute the fact it relates to, but maintain that Mr. Palliser had no connection with it."

"Do you think you could convince anybody who heard my story?"

"We can try. Is n't it clear to you that Mr. Palliser can't go on subsidizing you forever?"

"He'll go on until there's enough put by to bring his daughter up a lady."

Again Appleby failed to discern the sincerity of conviction in Davidson's tone, which would have been evident to him had he possessed any of the qualities which go to make a successful lawyer.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"I think you are mistaken," he said. "It is quite clear to us that you will tell your story sooner or later, and because it is Mr. Palliser will tell it before you in his own way. That cuts the ground from under your feet, you see. Then he will indict you and your daughter for conspiracy. It is a somewhat serious thing to blackmail anybody, but you shall have one more chance. I will pay you twenty pounds for Mr. Palliser's letter, on condition that you sign a statement confessing there is no truth in the slander you have brought against him, and leave his uncle's service within a month from to-morrow."

The man stood silent a moment or two, his gun on his arm; and it was unfortunate that Appleby could not see the passion in his face. A sullen hatred of the class he served had smouldered within him since the day a gunshot accident, for which he had obtained no adequate compensation, left him with a limp, and now when he saw the game was up it blazed into unreasoning anger. He may also have been as fond of his daughter as he was of gold, and deceived by her, for the veins were swollen on his forehead when he made a step forward.

"Who are you to thrust yourself into what does n't concern you?" he said.

"I am a lawyer," said Appleby quietly. "Don't come any nearer!"

Davidson dropped the gun into the palm of his left hand with a rattle. "I might have known it by your tricks," he said. "Well, I'll make you fight, and we'll see who Miss Wayne will believe to-morrow. Now take yourself and your money to — out of this!"

He raised the gun, and Appleby's calmness deserted him. With a sweep of the riding crop he struck the barrel aside, and, perhaps without Davidson intending it, there was a flash and an explosion. Then the riding crop came down upon a dim white face. The man reeled, recovered, and lurched forward, while next moment he and his adversary were panting and straining in a breathless grapple. Davidson was a strong man, but the blow had dazed him, and the refreshment consumed at the "Black Bull" had endued him with an unreasoning passion, which was not an advantage in a conflict with a man who kept his head. Appleby was also wiry, and

DAVIDSON MEETS HIS MATCH

tolerably proficient in a certain useful art. Thus when he got his fist home in a place where it would hurt Davidson slackened his grasp, and Appleby struck again as he flung him off. He staggered backwards and went down heavily. Appleby stood still until he rose shakily to his feet again.

"Go home," he said. "You will be sorry for this tomorrow. It will probably cost you twenty pounds."

Davidson turned without a word, and Appleby waited a minute or two watching him cross the meadow towards the narrow, one-railed footbridge that spanned the river. He was walking unevenly, but Appleby was too shaken himself to trouble about his condition. Perhaps keeper Davidson was still dazed by the blows dealt him, or his brain was clouded by impotent anger, for he passed on, a dim, shadowy figure, into the gloom of a coppice, and no man saw him alive again. Then Appleby went back to the hall and let himself in through the conservatory. He found Tony waiting him in a state of feverish anxiety, told him briefly what had passed, and, assuring him that Davidson would in all probability listen to reason next day, went to sleep. He also slept soundly, and awakened later than usual when Tony's man, who had found knocking useless, entered the room with some of his garments on his arm.

"Mr. Palliser was asking if you were up, sir, and they're getting breakfast now," he said, and then glanced at the clothes. "I've been giving them a brush. There was some mud on the trousers, and I notice a seam split in the coat. I could ask one of the maids to put a stitch in it before it gets worse."

"No," said Appleby, a trifle too hastily. "You can put them in my bag. I am leaving by the night train."

He got into his tweeds, and went down to find the rest of the men who had finished breakfast lounging about the hall, while Tony and his uncle stood on the terrace outside. A dog-cart was also waiting, and another vehicle coming up the avenue. Appleby commenced his breakfast, wondering — because he surmised that Miss Wayne would be anxious to hear what he had accomplished — whether any of the ladies would come down before the shooters started. By and by he saw a light dress flit across the gallery at the head of the stairway, and immediately got up with the ostensible purpose of going

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

back to his room. He, however, stopped in the corridor which led out of the gallery, where, as he had expected, Violet Wayne was waiting him. She usually appeared to as much advantage in the morning as she did under the glitter of the lamps at night, but Appleby fancied that she had not slept very well. There was, so far as he could see, nobody else about.

"You have something to tell me?" she said quietly.

"No," said Appleby. "I fancied I should have had, but instead I have ten pounds to give you back."

"Then some plan you had has failed?"

"Not exactly! I am going to try a bolder course."

The girl looked at him steadily. "I have trusted you, Mr. Appleby. Would it be too much if I asked you to take me into your confidence?"

Appleby shook his head. "I am afraid I can't very well do that just now," he said. "In the meanwhile you can be kind to Tony. He has been foolish — and a trifle weak — but he has done nothing that you could not readily forgive him."

There was a faint sparkle in Violet Wayne's eyes, and a suspicion of color in her cheek. "How do you know that my code is as lenient as your own — and are you wise in asking me to take so much on trust?"

Appleby smiled gravely. "I think I grasp your meaning, but if you try to follow up any clue I may have given you it can only lead you into a pitfall. Please wait, and I think I can engage that Tony will tell you the whole story. It would come best from himself, but he must substantiate it, and that is what I expect I can enable him to do."

The color grew a trifle plainer in Violet Wayne's cheek, and Appleby, who guessed her thoughts, shook his head.

"There is a question you are too proud to ask, but I will venture to answer it," he said. "I have known Tony a long while, and he has never wavered in his allegiance to you. To doubt that would be an injustice you have too much sense to do yourself. Now you have the simple truth, and if it is a transgression to tell it you, you must remember that I have had no training in conventional niceties."

The girl looked at him with a curious little glow in her eyes. "Tony has the gift of making good friends," she said. "One could have faith in you."

DAVIDSON MEETS HIS MATCH

She turned and left him, while Appleby, who went down, found Godfrey Palliser talking to the under-keeper on the terrace. He was a spare, gray-haired gentleman, formal and fastidious, and betrayed his impatience only by a faint incisiveness of speech.

"Davidson has kept us waiting half an hour. It has never happened before, and it shall not occur again," he said. "You have been round to the lodge, Evans?"

"Yes, sir," said the man. "They had not seen him since last night. He told them he was going to the fir spinny. Some of the Darsley men had been laying snares for hares."

"It shall be looked into, but we will make a start now as you have sent the beaters on," said Palliser, who turned to his guests. "I am sorry we have kept you waiting, gentlemen."

They started, and, as it happened, Tony and Appleby sat at the back of the dog-cart which followed the larger vehicle, while the rattle of gravel beneath the wheels rendered their conversation inaudible to those who sat in front.

"You heard what Evans said?" asked Tony anxiously.

"Of course!" said Appleby. "I am almost afraid Davidson has made a bolt. If he hadn't he would have come for the twenty pounds."

"I hope so," and Tony drew in a deep breath. "It would be a merciful relief to feel I had seen the last of him. Why in the name of all that's wonderful are you afraid he has gone?"

"Because I wanted a statement and your letter from him," said Appleby. "You see, you will have to tell Miss Wayne that story sooner or later."

"Tell her!" said Tony blankly. "I'll be shot if I do!"

"Then she'll find out, and it will be considerably the worse for you."

Now, Tony Palliser was a good-natured man, and had as yet never done anything actually dishonorable, but whenever it was possible he avoided a difficulty, which, because difficulties must now and then be grappled with, not infrequently involved him in a worse one. He lived for the present only, and was thereby sowing a crop of trouble which he would surely have to reap in the future.

"I don't think it's likely, and there is no reason why I should make unpleasantness — it would n't be kind," he said.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"You don't know Violet yet. She is almost unmercifully particular, and now and then makes one feel very small and mean. It would hurt her horribly to know I'd been mixed up in the affair at all — and, the fact is, I don't feel equal to telling her anything of that kind. Besides, I did kiss the girl, you see — and I don't think Violet would understand what prompted me."

"Still," said Appleby dryly, "that story will have to be told."

Just then one of the other men touched his shoulder and asked a question, while there are topics which when once left off are difficult to commence again; but Appleby fancied that Tony had made one incorrect statement. He felt, strange as it seemed, that he knew Violet Wayne better than her prospective husband did.

They drove on, and nothing of moment happened during the shooting, or at the lunch they were invited to at one of Palliser's neighbor's houses, though Tony, who seemed to have recovered his spirits, shot unusually well. He also bantered the beaters and keepers, and, though he was as generous as such men usually are, the largesses he distributed somewhat astonished the recipients. It was a bright day of early winter, with clear sunlight that took the edge off the faint frost; and most men with healthy tastes would have found the hours spent in the brown woods, where the beech leaves still hung in festoons about the lower boughs, invigorating, even if they had not just had a weight lifted off their minds. Tony made the most of them, and it was, perhaps, as well he did, for it was long before he passed another day as free from care again.

Still, the troubles he could not see were trooping about him, and it was doubtless as part of the scheme that was to test him, and bring about his retribution when he was found wanting, that a nut on the bush of the dog-cart's wheel slackened during the homeward journey. As a result, four men and several guns were flung without serious injury into the road; and when the horse had been taken to a neighboring farm, Tony and three of his friends found themselves under the necessity of walking home. He took them the shortest way by lane and stile, and they came to the footbridge across the river as dusk was closing down. Both he and Appleby long remembered that evening.

DAVIDSON MEETS HIS MATCH

The sun had sunk behind a bank of smoky cloud, and a cold wind wailed dolefully through the larches in the wood, under which the black water came sliding down. There was no mist in the meadows now, and straggling hedgerow and coppice rose shadowy and dim against the failing light. The river, however, still shone faintly as it swirled round the pool beneath the bridge, and the men stopped a moment and leaned upon the single rail. It was seldom any one but a keeper took that path to the hall.

Appleby noticed how the dead leaves came sailing down, and little clusters of them swung round and round in the eddies. It was a trifle, but it fixed his attention, and often afterwards he could see them drift and swing at the mercy of the current. Then it seemed to him that their aimless wandering had been curiously portentous. He, however, looked up when Tony struck a match to light a cigarette with, and saw his face by the pale flame of it. Tony shook off his troubles readily, and there was a twinkle in his eyes, while his laugh rang lightly at a jest one of the others made. Then a man standing further along the bridge stretched out his hand.

"There's a stone among the boulders at the tail of the pool that seems different from the rest. One could almost fancy it was somebody's head," he said.

"Good Lord!" said one of the others. "One could do more than fancy it. Can't you see his shoulder just above the water?"

Tony dropped his cigarette, and stared at Appleby with a curious horror in his face, but the latter gripped his arm.

"Keep your head!" he said sternly.

Nobody else heard him, for the rest were hastening across the bridge, and in a moment or two one of them sprang down among the boulders at the edge of the pool. He called out sharply as the others followed him, and standing very still when they came up with him, they saw a white face that moved as the stream swirled about it looking up at them. A wet shoulder also bumped softly against a stone.

"I think it's your keeper, Palliser," said one of them a trifle hoarsely. "It would have been more pleasant if somebody else had found him, but we can't leave him in the water."

Tony seemed to shiver, and glanced at Appleby. "Yes," he said, and his voice was very strained, "it's Davidson."

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

It was Appleby who, as one of the rest remembered, stooped down and grasped the dead man's arm. "Give me a lift," he said.

The men had evidently little liking for the task, but they accomplished it, and stood still again when the rigid object lay with the water draining from it at their feet.

"He must have fallen over the bridge and struck his head. There are stones yonder, and you can see the bruise," said one. "Still, it might not have happened that way, and it seems to me we had better push on to the hall, and send somebody for the police."

They went on in haste, and twenty minutes later Tony stood, a little white in face, in Appleby's room.

"I don't ask you whether it was the truth you told me last night," he said.

"No," said Appleby, who was flinging articles of clothing into his bag. "I could not have taken that from you, but I told you what happened precisely. Perhaps I should have seen him across the bridge, but I never thought of it. Still, there will be an inquest, and when they find out a little more it will be difficult to convince an average jury that one of us did n't kill him."

"It could be managed," said Tony, a trifle hoarsely.

"Yes," said Appleby, "I think it could, though I could n't be certain; but, if there was a defendant, not before everything came out. That would spoil my two best friends' lives. You see, he did not sign the statement, and folks are very quick to believe the kind of story that would certainly get about."

"That would ruin me," said Tony. "Godfrey Palliser would turn me out for bringing it on him. It's a trifle horrible. You have got to help me!"

"Yes," said Appleby, closing the bag with a snap. "I fancy it would. Still, there will be no defendant, because I'm going out of the country. If you sent to the bank you might lend me fifty pounds, and tell somebody to get the dog-cart out. There's a train I can get through to Liverpool starts in an hour. If I am ever able, I'll send you back the money."

Palliser stared at him. "But they may bring it in homicide against you! I can't let you do this for me."

Appleby smiled curiously. "I had decided to go, anyway,

DAVIDSON MEETS HIS MATCH

and I have n't a friend who would worry about me except yourself, and perhaps Miss Wayne. It would be very different with you. Now, don't waste a minute, Tony. I have made my mind up."

Tony Palliser had usually yielded to the domination of his friend, and was not in a condition to think very concisely then, so he did what he was bidden, and ten minutes later grasped Appleby's hand as the dog-cart came up to the door. He did not remember if he said anything, but Appleby, perhaps for the groom's benefit, laughed as he drew the rug about him.

" You will remember to send on the cigars you promised me," he said.

Then the groom flicked the horse, the dog-cart rattled away, and Tony Palliser was left standing, flushed in face, on the steps, with his heart beating painfully.

III

TONY CANNOT DECIDE

THE beat of hoofs died away, and Tony shivered as he strove to collect his scattered wits. He wanted to think, but mental effort had always been distasteful to his easy-going nature, and now the faculty of concentration had deserted him. It was also very cold out on the terrace, for the raw wind was driving a thin drizzle before it, and Tony was fond of warmth and light, so with a little shake of his shoulders he went back into the house, and sought inspiration in a stiff brandy-and-soda. After that he felt a little more cheerful, and decided that in the meanwhile there was nothing to be done but refrain from unnecessary worry and wait events, which was the usual course with him. There was, it seemed, nothing to be gained by involving himself before suspicion was cast upon his friend.

He, however, spent an unpleasant five minutes with his uncle, who asked a few general questions respecting the affair, in the library, and then went down to dinner, where Violet Wayne did not find him a very entertaining companion. She, however, noticed that he allowed his glass to be filled more frequently than usual, for Tony was an abstemious man, and during a lull in the conversation turned to him.

"I have spoken to you at least three times without getting an answer, Tony," she said. "One could almost fancy that you had something on your mind to-night."

Tony did not meet the questioning gaze of the big grave eyes, though there was a sympathetic gleam in them. "I have a headache. Gun headache, you know," he said. "I got a warm corner, and fired every cartridge I had. I had them specially loaded with an extra quarter-ounce, too."

Violet Wayne appeared thoughtful, for she had heard the other men grumbling at the scarcity of pheasants that after-

TONY CANNOT DECIDE

noon; but she was a wise young woman, and did not tell Tony so.

"What has become of Mr. Appleby?" she asked.

"Gone away," said Tony. "He left just after we came in."

Again Violet Wayne glanced at him with grave quietness, but Tony was looking at his plate just then.

"His train does not leave for an hour yet," she said.

Violet Wayne did not often speak without reflection, but she blundered then. Tony Palliser was not the man to boldly choose his path, but rather addicted to follow the one events seemed to force him into, and she who might have proved his good angel helped to start him down hill.

"He was going to Liverpool," he said, and a moment later regretted it.

"To Liverpool! What has taken him there? He told me he was going back to his office."

Tony looked round in search of inspiration, and did not find it. It was also a somewhat fateful moment for him, because he had as yet been guilty of nothing more than a passing indiscretion, which the woman would have forgiven him. Had he decided to take her into his confidence she would have believed his story, and she had sufficient strength of character to carry him with clean hands through the difficulty. As it happened, however, he was not looking at her, and saw only the glitter of light on glass and silver and the faces of his friends. Tony was as fond of pleasant company as he was of luxury, and what he saw reminded him that he had a good deal to lose. That put him on his guard, and he took the first fateful step in haste, without realizing where it would lead him.

"I don't quite know," he said; "Bernard isn't communicative. He asked me for the dog-cart, and I didn't worry him."

Violet Wayne deferred her questions, though she was not satisfied. She had her duty to her hostess, and because news of what had happened had got about felt it incumbent on her to do what she could to lessen the vague constraint, especially as Tony, who wanted to think and could not, did nothing whatever. He was glad when the meal was over, but afterwards appeared to even less advantage in the billiard room, where one of the men commented on his play.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"You are showing remarkably bad form, Tony," he said. "What is the matter with you? In your case it can't be worry, because there is nothing a man could wish for you apparently have n't got."

Tony did worse at the next stroke, and put down his cue. "It's a fact that I can't play to-night," he said. "You were not with us at the bridge, and it was n't a nice thing we had to do. As to the other remark, I suppose I've got my worries like the rest of you; but since you will get on just as well without me I think I'll go to bed."

He went out, and the man who had spoken laughed. "That is just the one thing that is wrong with Tony — he gives up too easily and does n't play the game out when it seems to be going against him," he said. "He had Bernard Appleby to help him through at school, but I have a notion that Miss Wayne would do as much for him now if he would let her, and if he's wise he will. Men like Tony generally find somebody to stand behind them, but that slackness is the only fault anybody could find in him. Tony never did a crooked thing."

"No," said another man dryly. "Still, it is comparatively easy to go straight when you are never called upon to stand up under a deflecting pressure."

"If Tony has n't had to do that yet, he will most certainly have to sooner or later, and Miss Wayne is the woman to help him," said his companion. "Will you take his cue and finish the fifty for him, Lonsdale? It is, you see, quite the usual thing."

Tony in the meanwhile sat staring at the grate in his room. No definite course had yet occurred to him, but he was conscious of a vague relief. Davidson, at least, could not come back to trouble him, and Tony knew that his daughter, whom he had done no wrong, did not possess her father's pertinacity. He fancied she could be easily dealt with, and rising with a little shake of his shoulders he went to bed, and, as it happened, slept almost as well as usual. Next day, however, events commenced to happen, for during the morning Godfrey Palliser received a visit from a sergeant of police. Soon afterwards he sent for Tony, and it was with distinct uneasiness the latter entered the library.

Godfrey Palliser sat, gray-haired and somewhat grim of face, beside the fire; and he was a punctilious English gentle-

TONY CANNOT DECIDE

man, with a respect for conventional traditions and no great penetration, to whom Tony owed his present status and all he hoped for in the future. He had led a simple, wholesome life, and, though it was perhaps not unwarranted, placed an undue value upon the respect his tenants and neighbors accorded him.

"This is an especially unfortunate affair," he said. "Sit down. I want to talk to you."

"Yes, sir," said Tony, wondering what was coming.

Godfrey Palliser drummed on the chair arm with his fingers. "There will be an inquest, and as I am, most unfortunately in this case, a magistrate, Sergeant Stitt thought it fit to consult with me. He has suspicions that there has been foul play."

"Stitt is a meddlesome idiot," said Tony. "It seemed quite evident to me that Davidson struck his head when he fell off the bridge."

The elder man made a gesture of negation. "Unfortunately he left his gun behind him. There was a dent on one barrel, and Stitt fancied that the grass round the spot where he found it had been trampled. That, and the condition of Davidson's clothing, points to a scuffle."

Tony gasped, for he had not expected this. "There is not a man in the neighborhood who would have injured Davidson," he said.

Godfrey Palliser flashed a quick glance at him. "Do you know when Bernard left the hall the night before it happened?"

Tony braced himself with an effort. "I don't quite remember, sir."

"Then I can tell you. It was a few minutes after eleven, and he took the path to the footbridge. When he came back his clothes were muddy."

Tony sat still a moment, horribly conscious that Godfrey Palliser was watching him. Then he broke out: "It's wholly impossible, sir, unutterably absurd! Nobody would kill a man without the least motive."

Godfrey Palliser's face grew a trifle grimmer. "There may have been a motive. Lucy Davidson was pretty, and, I understand, vain and flighty, while she disappeared, I think, a little too suddenly. You will remember when Bernard was last here."

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

Tony stood up, with a dampness on his face and his hands trembling. "Good Lord, sir, you can't believe that!" he said. "Bernard never had any failings of the kind. It must"—and Tony gasped and stared round the room—"have been poachers. You will remember Evans said Davidson had gone out to look for somebody who had been laying snares."

To his vast relief he saw that Palliser clutched at the suggestion. It would perhaps not have appeared very conclusive to another man, but Palliser was anxious as well as willing to be convinced, which makes a difference.

"Yes," he said. "That is the most sensible thing you have said for a long while, and I sincerely hope events will prove you right. I am getting an old man, and if a connection of the family and a guest in my house had been guilty of such an intrigue and crime, I think I could scarcely have held up my head again. No breath of scandal has touched our name, and I could not forgive the man who brought a shadow of ill-repute upon it."

The speech had its effect, for Tony was aware that he had nothing to expect if he forfeited Godfrey Palliser's good opinion. He also quite realized the fact that he was singularly devoid of the qualities essential to the man who finds it necessary to make his own way in the world, and very much in love with Violet Wayne. These considerations made for silence. Tony, however, did not discover until later that the next person Palliser sent for was the girl. It was with reluctance he did so, and he stood up leaning against the mantel when he had drawn her out a chair.

"I understand that you saw Bernard Appleby immediately before he left the house the night before last," he said.

The girl appeared perplexed. "I do not know how you came to hear of it, but as a matter of fact I did," she said.

"Then"—and Palliser made a little deprecatory gesture—"I feel sure, when I tell you that they are necessary, you will excuse me asking you a question or two. You met him in the corridor, I think with intent. What had he to say to you?"

A little flush crept into the girl's face. "He asked me to give him ten pounds. This will no doubt astonish you!"

It certainly did, and had Godfrey Palliser been a little less

TONY CANNOT DECIDE

punctiliose he might have betrayed it. As it was, he said in a perfectly level voice, "May I ask you for what purpose?"

There was no hesitation about the answer, and as he met Violet Wayne's eyes the unpleasant thoughts which momentarily obtruded themselves upon the man vanished again, and left him with a faint sense of shame.

"I had asked him to do me a favor which would entail some little expenditure," she said. "It was, in fact, to do a kindness to somebody I wanted to benefit, and could not have any bearing on your object in making this inquiry. I know you will take my word for that."

Godfrey Palliser was not gifted with much penetration, but the girl's composure had its effect on him, and he made her a little respectful inclination. "It would go a long way with me, my dear, even if the testimony of my eyes were against it; and Tony never did a thing that pleased me more than when he told me he had succeeded in inducing you to marry him," he said. "It is quite evident that you can throw no light on the affair."

Violet Wayne left him, a little perplexed, but relieved. As he believed what she had told him implicitly, his thoughts fixed themselves upon Tony's suggestion, and he commenced to sift what he had heard for anything that would confirm the poacher theory. He meant to do his duty as a magistrate, but he had made a fetish of the family honor, and the man who knows exactly what he is looking for has the better chance of finding it. Accordingly he almost convinced himself, and proceeded to another conference with Sergeant Stitt, who was a little more obtuse than superior.

Violet Wayne was, however, not relieved at all. Only one hypothesis suggested itself to her, and that was that the unfortunate keeper had had some hold upon Appleby, but she promptly dismissed it as wholly untenable. She felt convinced that the man who had been Tony's loyal friend could have done nothing that he need blush for, and the fact that he had been willing to take ten pounds from her was an additional proof of his innocence rather than evidence against it. She felt absolutely convinced that he would never have abused her confidence by asking her for the money had he desired it for his own purposes. This conclusion naturally led to the supposition that he had involved himself on Tony's behalf,

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

but she would not harbor that thought for a moment; while Appleby, whom she believed implicitly, had told her that Tony had done nothing wrong.

Still, it was evident that Tony was in trouble, and as he did not go shooting with the rest she found him idling in an empty room when dusk was closing down. He was standing by the hearth looking down into the flickering flame; but the fashion in which he started when she gently touched his shoulder was significant.

"You might have something upon your conscience, Tony," she said, with a little smile. "Sit down and talk to me. I have scarcely seen you to-day."

She sank into a low chair, and the uncertain firelight forced up her face and gleaming hair against the shadowy background. The pose, wholly unstudied as it was, also suited her, and she smiled as she saw the appreciation in the eyes of her companion. Tony's regard for her was respectfully deferential, but he was a man, and she did not disdain at times to profit by the advantages nature had endowed her with.

"I never saw you look better than you do just now," he said, and laughed as he found a place on the stool he placed at her feet.

"Turn your head a little, Tony; I want to see you," the girl said softly. "Now, what has made you so quiet to-day?"

Tony looked at her, and the effect was unfortunate. He saw the calm eyes shining with unusual tenderness, and felt the full influence of her beauty, even while he remembered that Appleby had said she would find out the story sooner or later and then it would be bad for him. He also determined, foolishly, that if the revelation must come at all it should, at least, be delayed as long as possible.

"I have my little worries, but they vanish when you appear," he said.

Violet Wayne shook her head. "That was pretty, but not quite sincere," she said. "In some respects I am older than you—and you are in trouble, dear. Perhaps if you told me everything I could help you."

Tony turned his head away, and checked a groan as he stared at the fire. "I have been a little thoughtless, and one

TONY CANNOT DECIDE

must pay for that kind of thing," he said. "Still, it would be most unfitting to trouble you with my trifling difficulties."

He felt a little constraining touch on his shoulder, and a low voice said, "Is it money? You must not be proud, dear, for I have plenty, and it could buy me no greater pleasure than to see your cares melt away."

Tony flushed a little. "That is out of the question, Violet, and you exaggerate," he said. "I have n't any real cares, you know."

The girl smiled at him. "Only very good imitations, Tony; but perhaps you are right. I should dearly like to give you whatever you have need of, but it would not please me to see you willing to take it. Still, why did Appleby go out at eleven o'clock that night?"

It was a chance shot, but it told, and had results Violet Wayne could not have anticipated. Tony started a little.

"Why should you ask me?" he said.

Violet Wayne was not as a rule demonstrative. Indeed, her behavior that evening would have astonished those who thought they knew her best, but the touch of her hand on the man's shoulder was caressing, and as she leaned forward nearer him there was a curious softness in her eyes.

"I want you to listen, Tony, and I am not going to find fault with you," she said. "When you showed your preference for me people who I know are wise talked to me of you. They had very little to urge against you except one thing, which I think is true. They said you were a trifle too fond of shirking a difficulty."

"I hope you thanked them for their kindness," said Tony dryly.

The girl pressed his shoulder. "Tony," she said, "shall I tell you why I liked you? Well, it was because I fancied the respect you showed me was genuine, and you were open and generous. That, at least, was one of the reasons, for I detest a cunning man. I am ready to give you everything, but I shall expect a good deal from you; and now you see why I am not pleased with your answer to my question."

It was an unexpected opportunity, and, though the man did not know this, the last he would have. The girl, as she had said, was willing to give him all she had to offer, of which her faith in him was not the least, but he had not the courage

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

to put it to the test. Had he done so she would have taken his word, and believed in it against all other testimony; but the story he had to tell was not a pleasant one, and he dreaded her incredulity, in which he wronged her past forgiveness. Meanwhile, looking up at her he saw, not the love and strength which would have saved him from his weaknesses, but the calm, proud face which was tender, too, just then, the gleaming red-gold hair, and the beautifully moulded form. In place of speaking he gazed at her a moment with passion in his eyes.

"I can never understand how you came to think of me at all," he said. "I am not fit to dust your shoes; but if I lost you now I think it would kill me."

The girl checked him with a little quiet gesture, and laid the hand she raised from his shoulder on his forehead. "I like to hear you tell me so, but there are times when the man who is willing to lose everything gains the most. I wonder if you understand that, Tony? There are men who do."

"No," said Tony in honest bewilderment, "I'm afraid I can't."

"Still," said the girl softly, "it is true; but perhaps it is n't seemly that I should preach to you. Am I to conclude that if any odium follows your friend because he went out that night you could not dispel it?"

This left a loophole, which was unfortunate, because the man reflected that he could offer no convincing testimony as to what had really happened at the fir spinny.

"No," he said a trifle hoarsely, "I could not."

Violet Wayne looked at him steadily, and Tony, who saw the gravity in her eyes, felt his heart thumping furiously. Then she said very slowly: "Since you have given me your word we will never mention this again."

Tony drew in his breath as he turned his head away. The crisis had passed, and he knew that Violet Wayne believed him; but a little shiver ran through him, for he felt that he was committed to a course of deception now, and that if exposure came he could not face her scorn. She was a proud woman, who seldom unbent even to him as she had done that evening, and his one impulse was to lead her thoughts as far from the question she had asked him as he conveniently could.

"You hinted that you had met men who would give up everything for — a fancy," he said. "Do I know them?"

TONY CANNOT DECIDE

"You know one. I think Bernard Appleby would sacrifice a good deal for a friend — or a woman he respected."

"He could not help it in your case. You could compel most men to do almost anything for you."

The girl shook her head. "Even if that is true it would not gratify me much," she said. "It is only those nearest and dearest to me I expect the most from, and that I am not worthy of it does not affect the case. Still, I think we have talked sufficiently in this strain."

Tony rose and stooped over her chair, but the girl made a little restraining gesture, and he straightened himself again.

"No," she said quietly. "Not now, Tony. We are strange creatures; but I think if you had made me a confession a little while ago I could have forgiven you anything and kissed you afterwards."

Tony said nothing, and a maid came in with a light; but he spent a very unpleasant half-hour when Violet Wayne left him. Now it had slipped away unprofited by, he saw what that opportunity would have meant for him. Tony was not clever, but he realized that fate does not give men such chances frequently.

IV

THE VERDICT

THE inquest on keeper Davidson was duly held, and at the commencement seemed likely to cause Tony Palliser less anxiety than he had expected. There were reasons for this, and among them was the fact that the Pallisers had lived at Northrop for generations, and the fathers of the men who served them had watched their game and groomed their horses. Godfrey Palliser was also a liberal master, who seldom put an embargo on any man's perquisites; while Tony scattered pleasant words and silver with a tactful kindliness that made either doubly acceptable.

There was accordingly a desire to spare them unpleasantness in the minds of those who attended the informal courts of inquiry held at the "Black Bull," as the result of which the men who appeared to testify at the one sanctioned by the law of the land came there with convictions already formed, for Northrop village had thrashed out the question. Northrop knew all about Tony's flirtation with Lucy Davidson, but it also knew a good deal more about that lady than Tony did, and exonerated him. He had, it was true, been seen to give Davidson five pounds, but that was not an astonishing thing when the friends he brought down had been enthusiastic over the partridge shooting provided them; while there were not many men in his uncle's service he had not given sovereigns to. The men remembered this, and hoped for more.

It was also known that he had not left his room on the eventful night, and though everybody was aware that Appleby had gone out, the guests at the hall were occasionally addicted to taking nocturnal strolls after an evening in the billiard room. Northrop accordingly knew just how much it meant to admit when it attended the inquest, and when the rustic mind adopts that attitude there is nothing further to be extracted from it.

THE VERDICT

The coroner did not elucidate a great deal when he commenced his inquiry. Tony, who appeared distressed by the recollection, as indeed he was, deposed to the finding of the body, and was corroborated by two of his friends. He was listened to sympathetically. Sergeant Stitt testified that he had found signs which apparently suggested a scuffle, but could not be certain there had been one. Then a hush of attention followed the appearance of the doctor. He alluded to certain bruises.

"The one upon the head was evidently caused by a fall upon a stone, which would, I think, alone have produced insensibility," he said. "The one upon the cheek was apparently the result of a blow from a stick, but it might have been occasioned by a fall."

"Would either of the blows alone have occasioned death?" asked a juryman.

"Not directly," said the doctor. "The cause of death was exhaustion resulting from immersion. A man who fell upon the boulders beneath the bridge and rolled into the water would be very likely to succumb in that fashion."

Two servants from the hall were called, and then Tony's man. "I saw Mr. Appleby go out," he said. "It was about eleven o'clock, but might have been later. He took something from a rack which held sticks and riding-whips. He usually did take a stick. What do I mean by usually? Well, he would walk down the avenue and home by the footpath now and then just before he went to his room at night. I heard him come in about half an hour later. I noticed mud on his shoes and trousers next morning; but he would have to cross a wet place before he reached the lawn."

Everybody seemed satisfied; but there was a little murmur when Miss Wayne appeared, and somewhat indignant glances were cast upon Sergeant Stitt. She wore a veil, but she removed it when she turned to the jury; and it was in a clear, cold voice, which had a trace of haughtiness in it, she answered the questions asked her.

"I am, I believe, the last person Mr. Appleby spoke to before he went out," she said. "So far as I noticed he did not appear disturbed or in any way irritated. I met him at the head of the stairway."

"Was the meeting accidental?"

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

A faint trace of color crept into the girl's cheek, but it was in a clear, even voice she said: "He had given me to understand that he wished to see me."

"Had he anything in particular to say to you?"

One or two of the jury made it evident that they considered the question in bad taste, but there was a curious silence when it was seen that the witness hesitated.

"He asked me for ten pounds," she said.

Tony gasped when this was told him, and felt his face grow a trifle warm, while a little thrill of indignation ran through him. He had been pleased to see his friend and sweetheart on good terms, but that one should borrow ten pounds from the other suggested a degree of intimacy he had not contemplated.

"Do you know why he wanted the money?" asked the coroner.

The girl looked at him steadily, and nobody saw that her hands were trembling. "No," she said coldly. "That is, I do not know exactly. I had, however, asked him to do me a favor which might cost a little money, and surmised that he needed some. It was not quite certain that I should see him on the morrow."

"What was the favor?"

Violet Wayne straightened herself with an almost imperceptible movement, but there was a change in her pose, and she held her shapely head higher. "It had nothing to do with anything that could concern this inquiry," she said.

"You are on oath, Miss Wayne," said the coroner. "Remembering that, you are willing to repeat the assurance you have just given me?"

"Yes," said the girl, standing very still, though every nerve in her was tingling. She long remembered the strain she underwent just then, but it was not until afterwards she was sorry that she had submitted to it. She did nothing by half, and her love for Tony carried an obligation with it. There were only one or two people, and Tony was not among them, who realized all that Violet Wayne was, but they paid her a respectful homage they offered to no other woman.

The coroner had not seen her until that morning, but her bearing, and perhaps her beauty, had an effect, for he signified that he was contented, and Godfrey Palliser was called. He carried himself a trifle stiffly, and was as usual immaculate in

THE VERDICT

dress, while it was with a suggestion of carefully suppressed annoyance, which some of those present sympathized with, he gave his evidence.

Davidson had served him four years, he said. He frequently went round the woods at night, and had of late suspected that poachers had been at work about the fir spinny. So far as he knew, and he had made inquiries, nobody but Bernard Appleby, a relation of his own, and a young man of unimpeachable character, had gone out of his house on the night in question. Appleby had spent fourteen days at the hall, and it was at least twelve months since he had stayed there before. It appeared unlikely that he should have intended to meet Davidson.

Palliser was followed by a teamster, whose evidence made an impression. "I came out of the 'Black Bull' with Davidson at ten minutes to eleven," he said. "He wasn't exactly what one would call sober, though a man who didn't know him would n't have noticed it. He told me he was going round by the fir spinny to see if he could catch somebody who'd been laying snares. I told him to be careful he did n't pitch over the footbridge."

Most of those present were sensible of a little relief. Nothing unpleasant could, it seemed, transpire now, and the jury, who waited for Appleby to inform them that he had seen nothing of Davidson during his stroll, began to see what their verdict would be. There was also no great show of interest when the coroner asked for Bernard Appleby.

He asked twice, however, and there was no answer, while the jury exchanged significant glances when five minutes passed and the witness did not appear. Then there was a curious silence as Sergeant Stitt, flushed with haste, came in.

"Mr. Appleby was duly summoned, sir," he said. "I have just received this telegram from the solicitors he is engaged with."

Nobody moved while the coroner opened the message, and there was deep stillness as he read aloud: "In reply to inquiry Appleby has not resumed his duties here as expected. Have no clue to his whereabouts. Anxious for information."

"It will be the duty of the police to discover them as soon as possible," he said. "Have you any notion, Sergeant Stitt?"

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

Stitt led in a young man whom everybody recognized as the booking clerk from the station four miles away. "Mr. Appleby bought a ticket for Liverpool just in time to catch the train on the evening Davidson's body was found," he said. "He came into the office and sat down about a minute. I noticed he turned up the steamer sailings in the paper he borrowed."

"A mail-boat left for New York the following afternoon," said Sergeant Stitt.

The effect was evident. Men looked at one another with suspicion in their eyes, the coroner sent for Palliser and conferred with him and Stitt, while the heavy stillness the murmur of their voices emphasized was curiously significant. Hitherto nobody had seriously thought of connecting Appleby with Davidson's death, but it now appeared that there could be only one meaning to the fact that he had sought safety in flight. Then the coroner stood up.

"It is unfortunate that more precautions were not taken to secure the attendance of so important a witness as Mr. Appleby," he said. "As it appears tolerably certain that he is no longer in this country, there is, I think, nothing to be gained by postponing the inquiry, and it is for you to consider whether you can arrive at a decision without his testimony."

The jury were not long over the work, and the Northrop carpenter and wheelwright made their decision known. "We find," he said, "that the deceased died of exhaustion as the result of a fall from the footbridge, during, or very soon after, a struggle with a person, or more than one person, by whom he was injured. We recommend that a double fence be placed on the said bridge, with three by two standards and two rails well tennoned in."

"I am afraid that is a trifle too ambiguous," said the coroner.

There was another consultation, and this time the verdict was concise. "Manslaughter by some person or persons unknown."

"It will now be the duty of the police to find them," said the coroner.

Northrop Hall was almost empty of its guests that evening. They, of course, knew what everybody's suspicions now

THE VERDICT

pointed to, and while it was unpleasant to leave abruptly, nobody felt that it would be an especially tactful thing to stay. Godfrey Palliser accepted their excuses with dry concurrence, but he pressed Violet Wayne and her aunt to remain. It would be a kindness, he said, because Tony seemed considerably distressed by the affair. The girl fancied that he appeared so when he came into the room where she sat beside a sinking fire. Only one lamp was lighted and the room was dim; while a cold wind wailed outside, and the rain beat upon the windows. Tony shivered, and his face seemed a trifle haggard when he stopped and leaned on the back of her chair.

"It is a wild night," he said.

"Tell me what you are thinking, Tony," said the girl.
"I fancy I know."

"I was thinking of the big liner driving through the blackness with Bernard on board. She will be plunging forecastle under into the Atlantic combers now. I almost wish I were on board her too."

"But I should be here," the girl said softly. "Do you want to leave me, Tony?"

Tony laughed. "Oh, I talk at random now and then, and I'm not quite myself to-day. That confounded coroner made me savage for one thing. Did you feel it very much?"

"Can't you see that I am tired, dear?"

Tony, who moved a little, saw it plainly by the pallor of her face and the weariness in her eyes.

"I felt I could have killed the officious beast," he said, and stood still, looking down on her irresolutely. "But whatever did you give Bernard ten pounds for, Violet?"

"Is there any reason why I should tell you?"

"Yes"—and the man's tone suggested that he felt his grievance was warranted. "I think there is. Of course, I'm not a censorious person—I can't afford to be—but it really didn't seem quite the thing, you know."

The protest was perhaps natural, but Violet Wayne checked a little sigh. She was in love with Tony, and that meant a good deal, but he was trying now and then, and she had discovered that his views were narrow, and now and then somewhat mean. Indeed, she had once or twice received an almost painful astonishment when he had made them plain to her,

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

In the present case his reproaches were especially ill-timed after what she had suffered on his behalf. Tony was in difficulties, and she had desired to free him of them; but it had been clear that he must be helped surreptitiously, lest his self-respect should suffer, which was why she had passed on the task to a man she had confidence in, and had so feared the coroner would force a revelation from her.

"You don't wish to vex me?" she said.

"No," said the man, still with a trace of petulance. "That is the last thing I would like to do; but if you ever want ten pounds when you have n't got them I wish you would come to me. You see, it really is n't flattering to me that you would sooner borrow from Tom, Dick, and Harry, and it sets the confounded idiots talking."

A faint light crept into Violet Wayne's eyes, and Tony knew he had gone far enough.

"The one thing I resent is that it apparently sets you thinking," she said. "I can't be satisfied with less than I offer you, Tony, and the man who loves me must believe in me implicitly. I did not get angry when you would not share your troubles with me."

Tony softened. "I'm sorry, Violet, but the fact is I don't feel very pleased about anything to-night. Nobody could expect it!"

"Is it Davidson's death that is troubling you?"

She looked at him with a curious intentness, for Tony's face was haggard, and a horrible fear came upon the man as she did so. Her gaze disconcerted him, and he fancied he saw suspicion in it. Accordingly he clutched at the first excuse that presented itself.

"Not altogether! It's Bernard," he said.

Another irretrievable step was taken. Tony had waited as usual for events, instead of choosing a path to be adhered to in spite of them. As the result he was forced into one by which he had not meant to go, and it led rapidly down hill. Violet Wayne, however, straightened herself a trifle in her chair.

"Tony," she said, "it is quite impossible that you should think what your words suggest."

The man's face flushed, for her quiet assurance stirred the bitterness of jealousy that had hitherto lain dormant in him,

THE VERDICT

and again he answered without reflection, eager only to justify himself.

"When a man borrows money, and goes out at night to meet another who may have been blackmailing him, and then disappears when that man is found dead with marks of violence on him, what would anybody think?" he said.

"Blackmailing him!" said Violet Wayne, and then sat very still a moment while the blood crept into her pale cheek, for the meaning of one or two vague allusions she had heard concerning Lucy Davidson flashed upon her.

"It slipped out. Of course, I should not have mentioned it to you."

"You have done so, but the thing is so utterly hateful that it carries its refutation with it"; and there was a portentous sparkle in the girl's eyes as she fixed them upon him.

Tony saw it, and trembled inwardly. He had been favored with glimpses of Violet Wayne's inner self before, and could discern the difference between a becoming prudery and actual abhorrence.

"Still," he said slowly, realizing that he was committed, "he disappeared. Of course, the affair may not be as black as it looks, and perhaps he was driven into it. Men with really good intentions are forced into doing what they never meant to now and then."

Violet Wayne laughed a little scornful laugh. "Is n't the cowardice which leads a man into meanness he is ashamed of more contemptible than bold iniquity?"

"Well," said Tony, "I don't quite know. I don't worry over those questions, but it seems to me there is something to be said for the man who does what he should n't when he can't help it."

"Can't help it?"

"Yes," said Tony. "I mean when it would only cause trouble to everybody if he did the correct thing."

The girl looked at him curiously. "I think we had better abandon that subject, Tony," she said. "We will go back to the other. Your friend could have had no hand in Davidson's death — because he is your friend, and because I know what kind of man he is. Is there nothing you could do to clear him?"

Tony shook his head. "No; I wish I could," he said.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"Still, you see, it does n't matter quite so much in his case. He leaves nobody to worry about it behind him, and had no prospects. He told me he was going out to try his fortune in another land, anyway."

"It does n't matter! Is it nothing that he should go out with a brand of that kind upon him?"

"Well," said Tony reflectively, "I really don't think it counts for very much where he is going to. You see, they are not remarkably particular in America."

Violet Wayne rose. "You are not in a pleasant mood tonight, Tony, and I am tired. We will not stay here and vex each other."

Tony endeavored to slip his arm about her. "I know I'm a bad-tempered beast now and then. I can only tell you that you are ever so much too good for me again."

The girl did very little to repulse him, in fact scarcely more than lift her eyes, but Tony's arm fell to his side. Then she smiled somewhat curiously. "Don't make too determined an effort to convince me," she said. "I should not like to believe you."

She went out, leaving Tony alone with a horror of himself. He realized that there could be no turning back now. He must go on by the path he had taken, and standing with hand clenched on the mantle he groaned a little.

V

APPLEBY MAKES A FRIEND

IT was blowing a moderate gale, and the "Aurania," steaming at full speed into it, rolled viciously. A half-moon shone out low down beneath wisps of whirling cloud, and the big black seas shook their frothing crests high aloft against the silvery light as they swept in long succession out of the night. The steamer met them with dipping forecastle from which the spray blew aft in clouds, lurched and hove her streaming bows high above the froth, rolled until one rail seemed level with the sea, and slid down into the hollow, out of which her head swung slowly up to meet the onslaught of the next. Bitter spray was flying everywhere, her decks ran water; but it was only between foremast and forecastle head she shipped it in cascades, and little groups of passengers stood where they could find shelter. They had finished their dinner with some difficulty, and because the vessel rolled so that it was not an easy task to keep one's seat or footing had found their attempts to amuse themselves below a waste of effort.

Bernard Appleby stood a little apart from one group of them under the lee of a deck-house. Tony had lent him fifty pounds, and he had taken the cheapest berth obtainable which would permit him to travel saloon. This was apparently a reckless extravagance, but Appleby had inherited a certain shrewdness from his father, who had risen from the ranks, and decided that the risk was warranted. He would, he told himself, certainly make acquaintances, and possibly a friend, during the passage, while he knew that the majority of those who travelled by those vessels were Americans who had acquired a competence by commerce, and could therefore direct him how to find an opening for his energies if they felt inclined. He had already made the acquaintance of five or six of them, and acquired a good deal of information about

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

the great Republic, which did not, however, promise to be of much use to him.

Still, he was by no means dejected. Bernard Appleby had a good courage, and there was in him a longing for adventure which he had hitherto held in check. He knew that the gates of the old life were closed against him, but this caused him no regret, for he had not the least desire to go back to it. Indeed, he wondered how he had borne the monotonous drudgery he detested, and practised an almost Spartan self-denial so long, and it was with a curious content he looked forward into the night over the plunging bows. The throb of hard-driven engines, roar of wind, and crash of shattered seas that fell back seething from the forecastle, stirred the blood in him. It all spoke of stress and effort, but there was a suggestion of triumph in it, for while the white-crested phalanxes arrayed themselves against her the great ship that man had made went on, battered and streaming, but irresistible. Appleby felt that there were in him capacities for effort and endurance equal to those of other men who had fought their way to fortune, if he could find a field for them.

Then he became interested in his companions. There were two women among them, and he could see the figure of one silhouetted against the blue and silver of the night when the steamer rolled. It was a dainty figure in spite of the big cape that fluttered about it; while the loose wisps of hair that blew out from under the little cap in no way detracted from the piquancy of the half-seen face and head. Appleby recognized the girl as Miss Nettie Harding, whom he sat opposite to at the saloon table.

"Keep a good hold, Miss Harding!" said one of the men beside her. "This boat is trying to roll her funnels out of her, and it seems to me quite possible for one to pitch right over the rail."

The girl's laugh reached Appleby through the roar of the gale, as she stood, poised lightly, with one hand on the guard-rail that ran along the deck-house, and the deck slanting like a roof beneath her, while the white chaos of a shattered sea swirled by, as it seemed, directly beneath her. Then she fell against the deck-house as the steamer rolled back again until her streaming plates on that side were high above the brine, and a woman said, "Can't you be careful, Nettie?"

APPLEBY MAKES A FRIEND

There was a crash beneath the dipping bows, a great cloud of spray whirled up, and a man's voice said: "Hold on, everybody! She has gone slap into an extra big one."

There was a few seconds interval while the wet deck rose up before the roll began, and then the "Aurania" swung back with a vicious jerk. Appleby heard a faint cry, and saw Miss Harding reel away from the deck-house. The sea lay apparently straight beneath her, with the steamer's slanted rail a foot or two above it. Almost simultaneously he sprang, and felt the girl's shoulder under his hand. How he span her round and thrust himself behind her he did not know, but next moment he struck the rail a heavy blow, and the girl crushed him against it. He afterwards decided that they could scarcely have fallen over it; but that fact was not apparent just then, and flinging himself on hands and knees he dragged the girl down with him. As he did so two of her companions came sliding down to their assistance, and the four glissaded back to the deck-house amidst several inches of very cold water as the following roll began. Appleby helped Miss Harding to her feet, and into the lighted companion, where she turned to him, flushed, gasping, and dripping, with a grateful smile.

"That was awfully good of you," she said. "I should have been hurt against the rail, anyway, if you hadn't got in front of me. But your face is bleeding. I hope I didn't hurt you."

Appleby said he was not hurt in the least, though his shoulder felt unpleasantly sore; and leaving her with an elder lady who came in with the rest he hastened to his state-room, where he struggled into dry clothing, an operation which is not altogether simple on board a rolling steamer. There was also a lacerated bruise on his forehead which required some little attention, and while he was occupied with it a man who tapped upon the door came in. He was apparently of middle age, and had a shrewd, lean face, with blue eyes that had a twinkle in them. He sat down and waited until Appleby turned to him. Then he held out a card.

"I guess you will know my name, but there's my address. Put it in your wallet," he said.

"Mr. Cyrus P. Harding," said Appleby. "What can I do for you?"

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

The man laughed pleasantly. "That is rather what I should ask you. Anyway, I want to thank you for the help you rendered my daughter."

Appleby made a little whimsical gesture. "The conventional answer fits the case. It was nothing, sir."

"Well," said Harding dryly, "it would have been a good deal to me if my girl had gone out over the rail."

"I don't think that could have happened."

Harding nodded, but the twinkle showed more plainly in his eyes. "I don't either, but I guess you were not quite sure of it then, and there are men who would have made the most of the thing. I understand you got between her and the rail, anyway, and that is what gave you the bruise on the head."

"I'm glad I had so much sense. I have, however, had more serious bruises, and may get them again. I hope Miss Harding is none the worse."

"No," said Harding. "She seems quite pleased with herself. It's an adventure, and she likes them. She will thank you to-morrow, and I don't want to intrude on you. Still, you haven't told me what to call you, and I hope to see more of you."

Appleby was a young man, and the fall against the rail had shaken him, or his answer would have been more prompt and decided.

"Walthew Broughton," he said.

Harding, he fancied, looked at him curiously, and then smiled as he went out; but there was a trifle more color than usual in Appleby's face when he took up the card. It bore a business address in New York, but there was written across it, apparently in haste, "Sonoma, Glenwood, Hudson River."

"I wonder if that has any special significance," he said. "I will not force myself upon the man, but it's quite evident I can't afford to stand off if he means to be friendly."

He met Miss Harding on deck next morning, and she graciously allowed him to find her a chair, pack her wraps about her, and then sit close by talking to her for half an hour, which he had cause for surmising excited the indignation of other passengers. He found her vivacious, witty, and almost astonishingly well-informed, for Nettie Harding had enjoyed all the advantages the great Republic offers its daughters, and

APPLEBY MAKES A FRIEND

these are many. Still, he knew that it is a mistake to overdo anything, and, though Miss Harding still appeared contented with his company, took himself away when two or three of her feminine companions appeared. They had questions to ask, and Nettie Harding laughed.

"Then the Englishman can talk?" said one.

"Yes," said Nettie Harding reflectively, "he can. Still, he's sensible, and does n't say too much. I'm rather fond of those quiet men. There was another point that pleased me. He did n't hang about where he would be sure to meet me, and then appear astonished when what he expected happened, as some men would have done, but waited until I walked up to him."

"After all, he only picked you up off the deck. There was really no danger; and I would like to have kodaked you holding on to each other. In daylight it would have made quite an amusing picture."

"Anyway, I must have hurt him, because he put himself between the rail and me," said Nettie Harding. "You see, I do weigh something, though I'm a good deal lighter than you are, Miriam."

Miriam, whose proportions were not exactly sylph-like, appeared slightly nettled, but the others laughed.

"He is quite good-looking," said one of them. "Now, such a send-off would make a good beginning for a romance. Quite sure you don't mean to fall in love with him, Nettie? No doubt he's poor but distinguished, or he would n't be coming out to us."

Miss Harding smiled, but there was a trace of softness in her eyes, which were of a fine deep tint of blue. "I don't think so, and there is a difficulty. I'm in love already — with the man I'm going to marry."

A girl who had not spoken nodded sympathetically, for she knew the story of Nettie Harding's engagement to an officer of the United States navy who was far from rich.

"This year — next year, Nettie?" she said.

Miss Harding smiled a little. "This one's nearly through, and I'm going to Cuba early in the next."

"Cuba can't be a nice place just now, with the patriots and filibusters running loose all over it," said the girl called Miriam. "What do you want to go there for?"

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"My father's going. He has a good many dollars planted out there, and I fancy he is getting anxious about them. I quite often go round with him; and Julian will be away in the Behring Sea."

She rose, for a cold wind still swept the sun-flecked Atlantic; but she spoke to Appleby at lunch, and also at dinner that evening, after which her father carried him off to the smoking-room. There was a considerable difference between their ages and views of life, but a friendship that was free alike from patronage or presumption sprang up between them in spite of it. Cyrus Harding was an American, and what is usually termed a self-made man, but he did not attempt to force his belief in himself and his country upon everybody else, though it was sincere enough. He was typically lean in face and frame, but his dress was as unostentatious as his speech, and he wore no diamonds, which are, indeed, not usually displayed by men of substance in his country. The little glint in his keen blue eyes, together with the formation of his mouth and chin, however, hinted that he possessed a good deal of character.

Being a man who noticed everything, he was quite aware that Appleby spent at least an hour in the aggregate in his daughter's company every day, and said nothing. Nettie was, he knew, a very capable young woman, and Appleby, he fancied, a gentleman, which was, in the meanwhile, sufficient for him. A friendship may also be made rapidly at sea, and on the seventh day out he asked Appleby a question. They were leaning on the rail together cigar in hand while the ship rolling her mastheads athwart the blue swung with an easy lurch over the long smooth heave of shining sea.

"What is bringing you out to our country?" he said.

Appleby laughed. "What I expect is quite the usual thing. The difficulty of getting a living in the old one."

Harding looked him over. "Army too expensive?"

Appleby flushed a little. "I have never been in it, though I think I was meant for a soldier."

"One can't always be what he was meant for," said Harding, with a little dry smile. "It's a general belief among young men in my country that they were specially designed for millionaires, but only a few of them get there. Got any dollars?"

APPLEBY MAKES A FRIEND

Appleby made a calculation. "Taking the rate at 4.80, I have about one hundred and twenty."

He had expected his companion to show signs of astonishment at his rashness, but Harding nodded. "I began with five, but I was younger than you are," he said. "Business pays best yonder. What are you strongest at?"

"I can ride and shoot a little, which is what seems most likely to further my intentions, and speak Spanish reasonably well. These, I surmise, are very doubtful advantages, but I have no liking for business whatever. Is there anything to be made out of horses or cattle?"

"Oh yes," said Harding dryly. "There are men who make a good deal, but you want ten or fifteen thousand dollars to begin with, anyway. It's only a big ranch that pays. Quite sure you would n't like to try your hand at business? I could introduce you to one or two men if you came out to Glenwood and stayed a week with me."

Appleby felt that the keen blue eyes were quietly scrutinizing him. "No," he said. "There is a fact I must mention which I also think would prevent you wishing to entertain me. A business man hiring anybody would have questions to ask, and I left the old country suddenly. I am not sure that a charge of manslaughter has not been brought against me by this time."

Harding did not seem in the least astonished; in fact, his very impassiveness had its humorous aspect, as Appleby recognized.

"Did you kill the man?" he asked.

"No," said Appleby, "I did not even attempt it; though in the face of circumstances I think nobody would believe me. Still, that's a story I can't go into, though it seemed the correct thing to mention it to you."

Harding nodded gravely. "The straight road is the shortest one, though it's quite often steep," he said. "Now, I had a notion you had some difficulty of that kind."

"I don't know that there is anything in my appearance which especially suggests the criminal."

"Well," said Harding, with a little laugh, "you did n't seem quite sure of your own name when you told it me; but I've handled a good many men in my time, and found out how to grade them before I began. I was n't very often

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

wrong. Now, it seemed to me there was no particular meanness about you, and homicide isn't thought such a serious thing in my country, when it's necessary. Before I was your age I had to hold on to all I had in the world with the pistol one night down in New Mexico—and I held on."

His face grew a trifle grim, but Appleby was glancing out towards the saffron glare of sunset on the ocean's rim. "I want to live in the open, and see what the life men lead outside your cities is like," he said. "There is nobody to worry about me, and I don't mind the risks. Can you suggest anything with a chance of dollars in it a little outside the beaten track?"

"You speak Spanish?"

"I was born at Gibraltar, and lived in Spain until I was ten years old."

"Well," said Harding, "as it happens, I can suggest something that might suit you, though I would rather, in spite of what you told me, have found you a business opportunity. The men who play the game will want good nerves, but there are dollars in it for the right ones. It's running arms to Cuba."

A little gleam crept into Appleby's eyes, and he flung up his head. "I think," he said quietly, "that is the very thing I would have wished for."

"Then," said Harding, "I'll give you a letter to some friends of mine in Texas."

He went away by and by, and Appleby decided that the cost of his saloon passage had been a good investment. Still, he wondered what Harding could have to do with such a risky business as he surmised the smuggling of arms into Cuba must be, until he strolled round the deck with his daughter in the moonlight that evening.

"I think you have made a useful friend to-day," she said.

Appleby looked at her with a little astonishment, and the girl smiled when he said, "I don't understand."

"I mean Cyrus P. Harding. There are quite a number of men with dollars anxious to be on good terms with him."

"What have I done to please him?"

"You would n't come to Glenwood," and the girl laughed again. "No, I don't mean that exactly, but I need not explain. Cyrus P. Harding never did a mean thing in his life, you see."

APPLEBY MAKES A FRIEND

Appleby smiled at her. "So one would surmise. In my country we rather believe in heredity."

"Pshaw!" said the girl. "There really is n't much in compliments when they're served out all round. But if you are going to Cuba I may see you there."

"Will you be in Cuba?"

Nettie Harding nodded. "My father has no end of dollars there—in tobacco and sugar."

"I wonder if one could ask what induced Mr. Harding to invest money in such an unsettled country as Cuba is just now?"

Nettie Harding looked up at him confidentially. "It's a thing I would n't tell everybody, and if I did I should n't be believed," she said. "Well, Cyrus Harding can see ever so far ahead, and I never knew him mistaken yet. Some day something will happen in Cuba that will give us an excuse for turning the Spaniards out and straightening things up. They need it."

"But if the thing does n't happen?"

Nettie Harding laughed. "Then I should n't wonder if he and a few other men made it."

Some of her companions joined them, and she said nothing more to Appleby; but they met again that evening, and she induced him to promise that he would spend at least one day at Glenwood, while when they disembarked in New York Harding walked down the gangway with his hand on Appleby's shoulder as though on excellent terms with him. He also kept him in conversation during the Customs searching, and when a little unobtrusive man sauntered by said to the officer, "Can't you go through this gentleman's baggage next? He is coming to Glenwood with me."

The unobtrusive man drew a little nearer, glancing at Appleby, and then touched Harding's shoulder.

"Is that gentleman a friend of yours, Mr. Harding?" he asked.

"Of course," said Harding. "He is staying with me. We have business on hand we could n't fix up at sea."

Appleby caught his warning glance, and stood very still with his heart thumping, apparently gazing at something across the shed, so that the man could only see the back of his head.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"In that case, I guess I'm wasting time," said the man, who laughed. "Still, you understand we have to take precautions, Mr. Harding."

He went away, and Appleby turned to Harding with a little flush in his face as he asked, "Who is that man?"

"That," said Harding, with a dry smile, "is one of the smartest of our New York detectives."

They reached his house at Glenwood that afternoon, and Appleby spent two pleasant days there. On the third he left for New York, and Nettie Harding smiled as she shook hands with him.

"I wonder whether we shall see you in Cuba?" she said.

"It will not be my fault if you do not," said Appleby. "I am heavily indebted to you and your father."

As it happened, he afterwards saw Nettie Harding in Cuba, and paid his debt; for Appleby, who had gone out under a cloud that Tony's sweetheart might retain her faith in him, was one of the men who do not take the kindness that is offered them and immediately forget.

VI

THE SCHOONER "VENTURA"

THE night was considerably clearer than anybody on board her desired when the schooner "Ventura" headed for the land. It rose in places, black and sharp against the velvety indigo, over her dipping bows, though most of the low littoral was wrapped in obscurity. Harper, the American skipper, leaned upon the helm watching the growing brightness in the east, and a man whose white garments cut against the dusky sea sat upon the rail close beside him. They were both anxious, for there were no lights on that strip of Cuban coast, and the "Ventura" had drifted with the stream in a calm which had complicated Harper's reckoning. He had to find a certain reef-studded bay, and run the schooner into a creek among the mangroves without being seen by the gunboat which he had reason to surmise was looking out for him.

Forward, a cluster of men were sitting about the windlass and leaning on the rail. They were of diverse nationality and doubtful character — American, Castilian, and African by extraction, though in the case of some of uncertain color it would have been difficult to decide which blood predominated in their veins. It was their task to supply the insurgents with the munitions of war, and they undertook it dispassionately, without any patriotic convictions, for the dollars it would bring. Indeed, most of them were not held in much esteem in the countries they belonged to, or they would not in all probability have been there on board the "Ventura."

Appleby watched them languidly from where he sat behind the wheel, and wondered what lay before him when he glanced towards the dusky coast-line. He was, however, not unduly anxious, for he had cut himself adrift from the cramped life he had led, and as yet found the new one pleasant. It needed qualities he felt he possessed, and which, indeed, he had with

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

difficulty held in due subjection in England; while the fact that it might at any time terminate suddenly caused him no great concern. In the meanwhile the risks and opportunities attached to it had their charm for one who had long found poverty and the restraints of conventionality irksome.

"We'll have the moon up in ten minutes," said Harper, as the "Ventura" swung up on a frothing sea. "That would suit us if we were in the bay, but I'm not certain where we're heading for just now. You still think that was Sparto Point we saw at dusk, Rosendo?"

The man who sat upon the rail shook his head. "Who knows!" he said. "If she is not the Sparto she may be the Playa Santiago, or the Cameron."

Harper turned to Appleby with a little gesture of resignation. "You hear him. He's talking," he said. "Thirty miles more or less don't count with them. If we don't get in to-day, we may to-morrow, and if it's next week nobody's going to worry. They've nice business-like notions in their country."

Rosendo laughed. "We not find the Sparto? Good! It is simple. She is farther on. We find her in two or three more hour."

"Oh yes!" said Harper. "Still, what I want to know is, what's going to happen if the gunboat comes along while we're looking for her? I've a notion it might mean a white wall and a firing party."

Rosendo shrugged his shoulders, and Appleby glanced towards the east. There was a bank of cloud in that quarter, but the sky above it was a pale luminescent blue. Then he looked astern, and saw the white tops of the seas heave against the darkness, for it was blowing fresh from the north. The "Ventura," rolling lazily, was running before it with only her boom-foresail and two jibs set, but now and then the crest of a sea that surged past lapped her rail.

"Would n't she stand more sail?" he said.

"Oh yes!" said Harper, pointing to the mainsail which lay loose beneath the big boom that swung, banging a little, above them. "It's there ready. Still, it will be 'most three hours yet before there's water in, and if the gunboat came along I'd sooner be here, where I've room to run, than jammed right up between her and a lee shore. If I was sure that was

THE SCHOONER "VENTURA"

the high ground behind Point Sparto I'd feel considerably happier."

They rolled on awhile, and then a half-moon sailed up. The sea changed to flashing silver, and Harper, leaving the wheel to Rosendo, went up the foremast hoops and swung perched on the cross-trees, black against the night. He came down by and by, and there was relief in his voice.

"That's the Point sure enough! We'll have the mainsail on her, boys," he said.

The men came aft in haste. There was a rattle of blocks, and Appleby bent his back among the rest, while the folds of dusky canvas rose thrashing up the mast. They swelled into shape and became at rest, while the schooner, slanting over suddenly, put on speed, and drove away towards the land with a great frothing beneath her rail. She rolled little now, but there was a thud when her bows went down and the spray whirled half the height of her foresail. Appleby felt the exhilaration of swift motion, and his pulses throbbed a trifle faster as he watched the great breadths of canvas that gleamed silver now sway athwart the blue, and the froth swirl past the slender strip of hull that was dwarfed by comparison beneath them. The "Ventura" was very fast, but she could not compete with steam; and he noticed that Harper, who had taken the helm again, every now and then glanced over the rail. He appeared to be staring persistently towards one quarter of the horizon.

Suddenly a man standing high on the cross-trees shouted, and Appleby, springing to his feet, saw a faint, dusky smear drift athwart the blue and silver, where a minute earlier there had only been sky and water.

"Smoke!" said Harper. "I don't know that it's the 'Enseñada,' but I'm taking no chances of meeting her. We'll have the gaff-topsails up, boys, and the foresail over."

He pulled at the wheel. There was a bang as the boom-foresail lurched over, so that it and the big mainsail now swelled on either hand. Then the men swarmed about the deck again, and Appleby wondered a little when amidst a clatter of blocks two more strips of sail went thrashing aloft, for it seemed to him that the "Ventura" was already carrying a risky press of canvas. He, however, pulled among the rest, and it was not until the schooner was clothed with canvas to

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

her topmast heads that he straightened his back and looked about him. As he did so she dipped her bows into a sea, and a cascade poured in forward. It came aft frothing when her head went up, and then as she plunged into the hollow another mass of foam came up astern and surged by a foot above her rail. Harper laughed.

"Wet feet don't count in this trade," he said. "She's not going to scoop in too much of it if I can keep her running, but you'll see something very like chaos if we have to put her on the wind. Is that smoke rising any?"

Appleby fancied it was, for the dusky smear had lengthened, and it seemed to him there was something more solid than vapor in the midst of it. The skipper, however, in view of the inadvisability of bringing the great mainsail crashing over, could not turn his head.

"Still, even if it is a gunboat, we should be well in with the land before she overhauls us," said Appleby.

"Yes," said Harper grimly. "The trouble is there's no water yet into the creek, and there'll be a blame nasty surf running into the bay. Still, there's a place where we could hold her to it with two anchors down, and it would take good eyes to make us out against the land. It's just a question whether those fellows yonder see us first."

It appeared to Appleby a somewhat important one, but he had to wait for the answer with the rest, and by and by it came. The man on the cross-trees shouted, the smear of smoke seemed to break in two, as though the vessel beneath it had changed her direction, and she became visible in a moment or two, a faint dark blur upon the moonlit water. Harper turned his head swiftly, and his face showed very grim in the moonlight when he stared in front of him again.

"I guess our chances have gone down fifty cents in the dollar," he said. "Get a range of cable up on deck. Then we'll have the boat cleared handy and the hatch-wedges out."

The men became busy amidst a rattle of chain, and then stood where it was a little dryer between the masts, with their shadows lying black upon the silvery cloths of the foresail. They were watching the steamer, which was rising upon one quarter with the smear of smoke blowing away from her. Appleby could see her plainly now, a strip of black hull that

THE SCHOONER "VENTURA"

rolled with slanted spars across the harmonies of blue and silver — and she seemed to him portentous in her shadowiness, for there was no blink of light on board her.

"The 'Enseñada'?" said Harper.

"Si, señor!" said Rosendo, with a little gesture which was very expressive.

Harper pulled at the wheel, and Appleby saw that he was addressing him.

"There are two of their gunboats on this coast, and it's quite in the usual course that it's the one I don't want to see that turns up," he said. "Her commander has a little grievance against me."

Appleby did not ask him what it was. He had something else to think of, and the swift upward lurches and wisps of spray that blew about the "Ventura" made conversation difficult. The seas also seemed to be growing steeper as she closed with the land, and washed in as they went smoking past. Still, but for that sinister shape steadily rising higher on one quarter he could have found pleasure in the scene. The wail of wind, the humming of the shrouds, patter of spray, and roar of frothy seas stirred the blood in him, while the swift reeling rush when the bows went up brought him a curious sense of exultation.

It was stress and effort of muscle and body he had hungered for in the sleepy English town, for slow endurance was nothing new to him, and he was apparently to get it now. There was a meaning in the tense black figures of the men, and the grim impassiveness of Harper's face as he stiffened his grasp on the wheel, for human fibre was under strain as well as hemp and wood and metal, which groaned under the pressure which racked them to the uttermost limit. Yet while the gunboat crept up astern Appleby felt at home, as though this was not a novel sensation, and he had been through it all, or something very similar, more than once before. The fixed look in the eyes that gleamed in the moonlight, the set faces, and the rigidity of the men's pose appeared in a curious fashion familiar.

A flash from the steamer roused him, there was a detonation, and a quarter of a mile beyond them a little white cloud rose from the sea. Some of the black figures swung round, but Appleby looked straight in front of him. He did not know

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

why he avoided any abrupt movement, but he felt without reflection that it was incumbent on him. It was, however, not the first time a man of his or his mother's name had stood outwardly unmoved, at least, under artillery fire.

There was also something to see ahead — a dim, forest-shrouded littoral across which the vapors were streaming, and a faint white line of beach. In the foreground were broad streaks of froth, and the long blur of a jutting point with a yeasty seething about the end of it. Away on the other hand lay a smear of dusky trees, and the gap between them and the point was, he surmised, the bay they had been looking for. It held no shelter for them that he could see. Then Harper called the Spaniard Rosendo.

"There's not going to be water in for an hour yet, anyway," he said.

Rosendo shook his head. "There is much tree on the Point," he said.

Harper appeared reflective. "Yes," he said, "that's what I was thinking. Well, with this wind the Point would break the sea, and she might n't bump the bottom out of her if we did put her on the bar. Those fellows could n't get a clear shot at us across the trees, and they would n't be anxious to send boats in considering the sea that's running. Still, there's a thing that's worrying me."

He glanced forward towards one of the streaks of froth which Appleby surmised showed where a reef lay below, and Rosendo made an expressive grimace.

"Los Dientes!" he said, and spread his arms out as though to indicate a measure. "One brazo a half now."

Harper nodded. "I can't run for the gut behind it without bringing that fellow too close," he said. "If I go round to weather we'll have to close-haul her, and he'd come up near enough to sink us if we took sail off her. Still, she'll scarcely carry what she has got now on the wind."

Rosendo shrugged his shoulders as he said in Castilian, "Between the fire and the cooking pot there is not much choice, my friend!"

Then the men between the masts came aft together, and one of them, whose color was not exactly white, stopped in front of Harper.

"We have no use for being run slap on the Dientes, and

THE SCHOONER "VENTURA"

she's not going to work off it if we hold on much longer," he said.

Harper swung a hand up commandingly. "When I'm not fit to sail this boat I'll ask your help," he said. "I've a good deal less use for showing the Spaniard just what I mean to do while he could spoil my hand by altering his course a point or two. Get your boom-foresail over, and the staysail on to her!"

It was done, though the "Ventura" rolled her rail in when the big sail swung banging over. By and by Harper brought the wind abeam, and she drove along at an angle to her previous course, with one side hove high, while the sea came in in cataracts over either bow. Appleby clutched the rail, for the deck slanted away beneath him, and he wondered how the barefooted men kept their footing. The other rail was apparently level with the sea, and the brine that sluiced down the incline washed knee-deep inside it. The masts sloped as the deck did, with the spray beating like grapeshot into the foresail between them; but the topmasts above them slanted further, and Appleby understood why Harper's face was anxious when he glanced aloft. The gunboat was within easy range now, and it was evident there would be no escape for them if anything yielded under the strain. In fact, Appleby was wondering whether her commander felt sure of them since he was not firing, when there was another flash followed by the roar of a gun. An unseen object that could be heard through the sound of wind and sea passed between the masts, and Harper nodded.

"I guess that decides the thing. What she can't carry she'll have to drag," he said.

She dragged it for another five minutes, staggering under a press of sail, and then there was a crash aloft, and topmast and mainsail gaff fell to leeward together. A clamor of voices went up, and the "Ventura's" bows swung round a little further off the wind; while Appleby, who saw Harper's face in the moonlight, noticed that it was set and very grim.

"You can run down the staysail and outer jib so she'll not fall to leeward all at once," he said.

The men went forward floundering amidst the spray, and the plunges grew a trifle easier, while the seas swung the "Ventura" aloft instead of deluging her; but a glance made

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

the position unpleasantly plain to Appleby. To leeward lay the white frothing on the Dientes reef, and he surmised that the "Ventura" could not clear it without her after canvas; to windward the gunboat, coming down on them rapidly. There was, it seemed, no escape, and he wondered vaguely what would happen. Harper said nothing whatever, but stood with his lean figure casting a black shadow upon the crippled mainsail, grasping the wheel. So they drove on for another five minutes, and then, with a glance at the gunboat, the skipper straightened himself.

"They're not going to have the guns, and the schooner might fetch ten dollars when I'm through with her," he said. "Get the foresail off her, and stand by to swing out the boat!"

The sail came down thrashing, and the men stood very still and silent when they had hooked the tackles on the boat. Their faces were turned forward, and Appleby guessed that they were watching the white upheavals that showed where the seas rolled across the submerged reef. This was not astonishing, for the "Ventura's" bows had swung further round, and it was evident that Harper was running them upon it. Appleby was sensible of a curious admiration for him. He still stood at the wheel, slouching over it, now suspense had gone and certainty had come, a most unimpressive figure, in old duck jacket and brine-soaked trousers that were both too loose for him, but it was evident that the spirit which disdains dramatic expression and often burns most clearly in unexpected places was in him.

"Hold on!" he said quietly as the bows went up.

Then she struck, with a crash that sent two men reeling across her deck, and the sea that rolled up behind her surged frothing on board. It went forward waist deep; the "Ventura" lifted, and came down again, with everything in her rattling and her crew holding fast for their lives. Then she twisted round, so that the next comber foamed across her and ground her on the reef, hove herself up, scraped forward, grinding and groaning, a few more fathoms, and stopped again; while a negro and a Cuban shaken from their hold rolled down the slanting deck clutching at each other until they fell into the water pent up by the lower rail. The din was bewildering, for every block and spar banged and rattled

THE SCHOONER "VENTURA"

amidst the dull roar of the seas, but it was rent by the crash of a gun.

Grasping the rail with both hands, Appleby saw the gunboat rolling black athwart the moonlight, while a smear of vapor broadened about her; but there was another sound beneath him as he gazed, and while the splinters flew in showers a great rent opened in the deck. Nobody said anything, or could have been heard if he had, and Appleby clung tighter still when once more a sea crested with spouting white came along. It lifted the "Ventura" up, and then there was a curious quietness as it dropped her clear of the reef. Through the sudden silence Harper's voice rose evenly and almost expressionless.

"I guess there's some of the rudder left, though it's jammed. Give me a hand," he said.

Appleby sprang to help him, and between them they dragged the helm over. The "Ventura" lurched on more smoothly with a gurgling sound inside her, for the reef broke the sea; but ten minutes later she struck again, and remained this time immovable. Nobody waited for orders, and in swift silence the boat was got over, while a fire commenced to twinkle on the beach. Wooden cases were passed up from the hold, and — for the water was smoother there — the boat got away. Four men went in her, and the rest dropped into the hold, where they tore out boxes and cases and passed them from man to man. While they worked the gun boomed again, but the gasping men toiled the more fiercely, and Appleby did his part with them. He was dripping with perspiration and spray, his hands were bleeding, and his duck jacket rent up the back, but, gasping and panting, he labored on with a fierce pleasure that seemed wholly illogical.

Once he lifted his head above the hatch, as he tore the jacket which impeded him off his shoulders, and saw that the gunboat had stopped. She was not firing now, and his comrades had, he fancied, sent three loads ashore by that time; but he had scarcely glanced at her when Harper saw him.

"Hustle!" he said. "The boats are coming."

How long they toiled in the hold Appleby could never remember, but though it appeared no more than a few minutes to him the moon had moved across a broad strip of sky when

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

he crawled on deck again. The boat lay beneath him, half full of cases, and the men were dropping into her. Two other boats showed for a moment to windward, and then sank from sight again.

"Hold on!" said Harper, pointing to the cases still on deck. "Into the sea with them!"

Appleby and another man threw them over, though there were impatient cries from the boat below, and the rest were shoving off when they dropped into her. Somebody was baling furiously, two men tugged and thrust, Spanish fashion, at every oar, and they reeled away shorewards with the water lapping into her. Then a fire grew brighter above the roaring beach, men came floundering waist-deep through the surf, those in the boat sprang over, and they went up with the wash of a sea. Appleby, scrambling out of the backwash, stood up, dripping, breathless, and aching all over, and saw Harper not far away and a host of dusky figures flitting about the fire. Then there was a flash from seawards, a crash in the forest behind them, and they disappeared.

"Well," said the skipper quietly, "the 'Ventura' is n't going to sea any more. You have to take your chances in this business; and we got most of the inside out of her, anyway."

VII

THE DESCENT OF SANTA MARTA

A LITTLE fire burned in a hollow of the dusty barranco that fissured the face of the hill, a clear red fire of the kind that gives little light and makes no smoke, and its pale glow showed but feebly against the rock behind. This was still flushed with a warm lustre caught from the western sky, though the sun had dipped and the fleecy mists were creeping across the dusky plain below.

A group of weary men lay about the fire, dusty and ragged, for they had spent most of twelve weary hours forcing a path through thickets and climbing like goats from rock to rock under the heat of the tropics. Two of them wore garments of cotton, which hung about them rent by thorns; three others jackets of American make, looted from a loyalist store; and one trousers of English tweed, through which his knees protruded, and a jacket of alpaca of a kind esteemed in Spain. He had, however, a red silk sash of beautiful texture, which had cost somebody else a good many dollars, round his waist; and his face, which was bronzed to a coffee color, had once been of paler complexion than those of most of his companions. He raised himself a trifle, and glanced about him with a little whimsical smile.

"They are a choice collection of scarecrows to take a city with," he said in English.

A man who lay close by looked up with a twinkle in his eyes. "I have seen smarter soldiers," he drawled. "Still, they're a hard crowd, and I'd feel kind of sorry for Colonel Morales if his cazadores don't put up a good fight to-night. What we have on hand is n't quite the thing I came out to do, but I guess it's better than catching fever down there in the mangrove swamps. That's how it strikes me, though it will scarcely be the kind of business you've been used to, Appleby."

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

Appleby laughed again as he glanced at the ragged men sprawling in attitudes that were rather easy than picturesque a little farther up the gorge. They were of various shades of color, from pale Castilian olive to African jet, and a good many of them were barefooted, while the shoes of the rest were burst. The arms scattered about them were as curiously assorted — American Marlin rifles, old English Sniders, Spanish service weapons, and cutlass-like machetes with a two-foot blade, which proved as efficient when, as quite frequently happened, there was a difficulty in obtaining the right kind of cartridges.

They were for the most part men with wrongs, individual as well as national; for the Spanish system of checking disaffection was sharp and stern, and the man who has seen brother or comrade butchered to bolster up an effete authority is apt to remember it. Those who had no wrongs possessed a lust of plunder which served almost as well as animus; but there were a few who had been driven to join them by patriotic convictions. They had already made themselves a terror to the conscript troops of Spain, as well as peaceful peasants with loyalist sympathies, who called them the Sin Verguenza — the men without shame. It was not from choice that Appleby had cast in his lot with them, but because it seemed to him preferable to falling into the Spaniards' hands. He had, however, by daring in one encounter, and shrewd counsel, already made himself an influence, and had been endowed with the rank of Teniente.

"No," he said a trifle dryly, "it is not. When I plundered folks in my country I did it for other people with a bill, and I had the law behind me. I was trained to it, you see."

"It's quite a good trade," said Harper, who had joined the Sin Verguenza because the coast was too strictly watched to leave him any chance of getting away again. "Kind of pity to let up on it. It was a woman sent you here?"

Appleby laughed, and then sat silent a moment or two staring straight before him. The dusty gorge seemed to fade, and he could fancy himself standing once more at the head of a shadowy stairway in an English hall looking into a woman's eyes. They were big gray eyes that seemed to read one's thoughts, set most fittingly in a calm, proud face, above which clustered red-gold hair, and he had seen them often since that

THE DESCENT OF SANTA MARTA

eventful night, on many a weary march, as well as in his sleep.

"Yes," he said; "but not in the way I think you mean. She was my best friend's sweetheart, and nothing to me. No doubt she has married him by now."

Harper's smile seemed to express incredulity, and for the first time a doubt flashed into his comrade's mind. Would he have done so much for Tony if the woman had been any one else than Violet Wayne? The question almost startled him, and though he strove to answer it in the affirmative no conviction came. Tony had been his friend, and until he came to Northrop he had never seen the girl; while it was, of course, preposterous to suspect that he had gone out under a cloud for her sake; and yet the doubt remained to be afterwards grappled with. In the meanwhile he brushed the question aside as of no moment. Violet Wayne would marry Tony, and in all probability he had already passed out of her memory. He was, however, glad when a man with an olive face stood up beside the fire and glanced at him with a smile.

"Among comrades it is not good courtesy to speak apart, and the English is a difficult tongue to me," he said in Castilian. "I have apprehended no more in the Havana than the response discourteous, 'You bedam.'"

Appleby laughed. "I fancy you others can beat us in that line," he said. "Shall we get in to-night, Maccario?"

The Insurgent captain made a little expressive gesture. "Who knows!" he said. "They have two companies of cazadores, but there is this in our favor — they do not expect us. Four days' march — for troops — from Adeje, and we have come in two! Yes, I think we shall get in, and then there will be trouble for those others in Santa Marta and the Colonel Morales."

Appleby glanced down the barranco, and saw framed, as it were, in its rocky gateway the sweep of plain below. The tall green cane and orange groves had faded to a blur of dusky blueness now, but in one place he could still discern the pale gleam of white walls. That was Santa Marta, and he remembered how they had been welcomed there when, weary and dusty with travel, they had last limped that way. There were no troops in Santa Marta then, and the Sin Verguenza, who did not know that an infantry battalion lay close by, had

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

accepted the citizens' hospitality, and borrowed much less from them than they usually did when their entertainers had loyalist sympathies. While they slept the deep sleep of weariness the cazadores fell upon the town, and the Colonel Morales allowed a very short shrift to those who failed to escape from it. Therefore Santa Marta was anathema to the Sin Verguenza, and, what was almost as much to the purpose, it was rich.

While he watched the white walls faded, and the fire in the barranco grew brighter as darkness closed down. A negro, who removed a kettle from it, carefully put it out, and served them with a meal, though Harper sighed disgustedly as he lighted a maize-husk cigarette when he had consumed his portion.

"Well, I guess we'll get breakfast to-morrow, if we're alive," he said. "I've lived on some kind of curious things in Cuba, including fricassee of mule, but onions, bad guavas, and half-ripe mangoes, as a mixture for fighting on, does n't suit my taste at all. No, sir. I want to lie down nice and quiet, and not worry anybody, when I've got dysentery."

His companions, however, did not complain. Perhaps they were accustomed to scarcity, though the Sin Verguenza lived well when they could do so at other men's expense; and there is a capacity for patient endurance in most of the peoples of Spain. They lay smoking cigarettes instead, while a little cool breeze came down out of the soft darkness that now veiled the hills above. Beneath them lights twinkled dimly like clustering fireflies in the misty plain, and once a faint elfin ringing of bugles came up. The Sin Verguenza answered it with a hoarse murmur, and then lay still, patiently biding their time.

The dew settled heavily as the rocks grew cooler; Appleby's alpaca jacket grew clammy, but he lay motionless beside the embers, once more grappling with the question what was he, an Englishman of education, doing there? Violet Wayne's eyes seemed to ask it of him reproachfully, and he could not find a fitting answer. The plea that he was there because he could not help it did not occur to him, for he was young, and believed that a determined man can shape his own destiny. Instead, he admitted vaguely that the reckless life, the testing of his bodily strength, the close touch with human nature

THE DESCENT OF SANTA MARTA

stripped of its veneer, and the brief taste of command, all appealed to him. This, he knew, was no defence; but he felt that he at least owed the Sin Verguenza something, for they had come upon him while he hid from the troops of Spain, and, finding that he had nothing but his life to part with, had incontinently given him what they had, which was just then very little.

At last the Captain Maccario rose to his feet and called aloud. There was a murmur of voices, a clatter of arms, a rattle of stones, and a patter of feet, and the Sin Verguenza came out from the barranco like beasts from their lairs. The hillside fell steep beneath them, but they went down, flitting noiselessly, half-seen shadows, while each man chose his own path, and not as troops would have done. Here and there the machetes cleared a way where it would take too long to go round, or there was a crackle of undergrowth when they plunged into a belt of trees. Then a mule track led them down to the level, and with a shuffle of broken boots and soft patter of naked feet they swung along the dusty carretera road. It wound away before them smelling of dew-cooled earth, a faint white riband, past the shadowy tobacco and dusky sugar cane, and there was no stoppage when here and there a flat-roofed house loomed up beside it. Then there was a murmur of warning, a drowsy "Viva la libertad!" and the column passed on; for the insurrection had taken hold, and the enemies of the Sin Verguenza were the men who had something to lose.

Still, a dozen men with rifles, and cartridges to match, stayed behind when they filed through a white aldea lying silent amidst the cane, and the Sin Verguenza swung into slightly quicker stride. If the Colonel Morales was to be caught at all he must be caught napping, and, as they knew, he usually slept with one eye open. Still, Appleby fancied it might be accomplished, for he had discovered already that the Castilian has a disdain for petty details, and frequently leaves a good deal to chance.

By degrees the dust grew thicker and the little flat-topped houses more plentiful, while here and there white haciendas grew into shape among the trees. There were no lights in any of them; but by and by the Sin Verguenza stopped where the white orange flowers lay crushed upon the road and consulted

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

with their guide. The Colonel Morales, they believed, did not expect them, but it was likely that he had pushed forward a section or two of cazadores to watch the road. The leaders also argued softly for some little time, and Appleby listened with his Marlin rifle under his arm, noticing how the fireflies sparkled in the leaves meanwhile. There were great stars above him in the sweep of cloudless indigo, and the low murmur of voices emphasized the stillness, while the heavy scent of the orange flowers was in his nostrils. Long afterwards a vision of the long, straggling column waiting in the dim white road would rise up before him when he breathed that scent.

Then they went on again, by paths that led through tobacco fields and amidst breast-high cane dripping with the dew that brushed them as they passed. This was, however, the work the Sin Verguenza were accustomed to, and no one saw them flit through the misty fields file by file. The cazadores, on their part, marched with bugles and wagons and loaded mules; and there was perhaps some excuse for their leader, the Colonel Morales, who believed the Sin Verguenza to be hiding some ten leagues away.

They stopped for the last time within sight of the white-walled town, which lay dark and silent girdled by thin wisps of mist, and the Captain Maccario spoke to those who could hear him. His words were not eloquent or especially patriotic, but they were answered by a portentous murmur; and Appleby surmised that there would be wild work if the Sin Verguenza sacked the town. He, however, moved forward as he was bidden with his ragged half-company, realizing that in the meanwhile he was rather going with than leading them. Where the rest went he could not see, for his attention was occupied in getting into and out of enclosures noiselessly, and once he fell into an aloe hedge and pricked himself grievously. Then he wondered what had happened to the barefooted men, but none of them at least said anything, and the dim, flitting forms went on. It all seemed unreal to him — white walls that rose higher, shadowy figures, and the silence they scarcely disturbed; but once more he was vaguely conscious that it was curiously familiar.

Then there was no more cover, for they straggled out, not in ranks, but clusters, from among orange trees and tall, flowering shrubs, which he fancied by their scent were olean-

THE DESCENT OF SANTA MARTA

ders, with a bare strip between them and the flat-topped houses. Santa Marta lay before him scarcely two hundred yards away, and he felt his heart throb painfully. His guide whispered something, and Appleby nodded, though he could not remember what the man had said, and they went forward at a run. The patter of feet, and clatter of strap and swivel, seemed to swell into a bewildering din, but they were almost upon the fielato offices, where the carretera entered the town, before a rifle flashed.

It was answered by a bugle behind them, for it seemed that the cazadores had watched the road; another rang out in the town. But it was in grim silence the Sin Verguenza ran, though there were now pale flashes along the parapet of the flat roofs in front of them. A man — a negro, he fancied — clutched at Appleby's arm, loosed it, and reeled backwards with a shrill scream. Another staggered, and Appleby trod on him as he fell under his feet. He scarcely saw the man, only the white walls that seemed to come no nearer, though he knew by the way his heart was thumping that he was running savagely. A curious din was going on, bugles ringing, the patter of desultory riflery; but he caught the words of somebody who ran behind him, and cried out breathlessly in Castilian as he swung up his hand.

Swinging past the fielato offices they swept under a white wall, and plunged into a shadowy calle, where pale faces peered out at them from the lattices. They went down it at a run, and would have gained the broad plaza it led to but that the blast of a volley met them in the face. Men went down, but not many, for Appleby heard the click of the bullets on the walls and stones, and surmised that it was conscript troops shipped off half trained in haste from Spain that fired. He could dimly see more of them flocking into the calle, and it became evident to him that his men must go through them.

With a hoarse shout he sprang forward, though he could never remember whether it was in English or Castilian he cried, and the Sin Verguenza came on with a roar behind. This was not the kind of fighting they preferred, but they had the best of reasons for surmising that no mercy would be shown them if they did not succeed. They were in among the huddled men before the rifles could flash again, barrel and

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

butt rattling among the bayonets of those who had found opportunity of fixing them, and machetes swinging.

Almost to Appleby's astonishment they also went through; and when, swinging the Marlin rifle by the muzzle, he reeled out into the plaza the cazadores fled across it like sheep. There was a breathless howl as they did so, a fresh trampling of feet, and the rest of the Sin Verguenza poured out from another calle with a half-company of cazadores retiring before them, and firing as they went. Some of them were less than half dressed, but they gave back unwillingly, with the spitting of their rifles showing red against the walls that shut in the shadowy square.

It seemed to Appleby that if the others rallied and joined them the Sin Verguenza would have their work cut out, and when one who carried a sword in place of a rifle made a stand he shouted in Castilian. He spoke the words that came to him, without reflection; but he was the son of a ranker, and the grandson of a colonel on his mother's side. There was a flicker of riflery from the calle where Maccario's men were, but the officer with the sword was standing still, and men who turned by twos and threes closing in on him. The first mob of beaten men were also halting, when Appleby hurled his ragged handful like a wedge in between.

They went in with clubbed rifle and red machete; the officer went down, and for a few wild moments cazador and rebel fought hand to hand. Then the drilled men broke and fled, half of them to meet the other band of Sin Verguenza pouring from the street, and the rest up the dark calle that led out of the plaza with Appleby and his followers hard upon their heels. It was a fierce chase, but a short one, for the cazadores vanished into a great archway, and streaks of red sparks lighted the windows above. Appleby glanced over his shoulder and saw the rest of the ragged column running down the street, and then that some of them were going down. He had no leisure for reflection, but it was borne in upon him that if they were to carry Santa Marta it must be accomplished before the scattered infantry had recovered from the surprise, for he had seen already that there is very little cowardice amongst the troops of Spain.

What he said or in which tongue he spoke he did not know, but in another moment he and a negro with a machete sprang

THE DESCENT OF SANTA MARTA

into the smoke of the rifles that whirled in the archway, and, howling like beasts now, the Sin Verguenza followed them. Men he could scarcely see broke away before them, though he fancied some remained and were trampled on; and then they were in a broad patio with lights shining behind the lattices about him, and the negro was no longer beside him. A door crashed to in front of them, pale flashes shone at the windows; but in another moment the door went down, and they were pressing up a stairway through stinging smoke, with half-seen men firing down on them. There was dust in the smoke, and the plaster came raining down until Appleby could scarcely see anything at all; but the Sin Verguenza went on, and he was borne forward in front of them when they poured tumultuously out upon a flat roof at the head of the stairway. Then there was a roar of exultation, and he dimly saw men in uniform floundering over the low walls that divided roof from roof, while from other openings there poured out more of the Sin Verguenza.

Appleby wondered why he could not see them clearly, and then his hearing also seemed to fail him. He was conscious of a confused shouting in the street below, but it grew curiously faint, and he staggered clear of the rest, and, scarcely knowing why he did so, groped his way back to the patio, where he sat down beside a bush of heliotrope or some other flower that had a heavy sickly smell. He did not know how long he sat there feeling cold and faint, but at last somebody shook him and held something to his lips. He drank, gasped, and saw Harper smiling gravely down on him.

“I guess you feel better now!” he said.

Appleby blinked at him. “I don’t quite know what’s the matter with me, but I feel — dazed,” he said. “What are the boys doing?”

Harper gravely felt his head, for Appleby had lost his hat. “Well, that’s not astonishing — and it’s a good one,” he said. “The whack that sergeant gave you would ‘most have felled a bullock. As to the other question, the Sin Verguenza have the town. Morales’ men hadn’t a show at all, though they might have made a stand if you hadn’t kept them on the hustle. Take another drink.”

Appleby drank again, and his scattered senses came back to him. “I don’t seem to remember very much,” he said.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"No?" said Harper, with a curious little laugh. "Now, it's my business to get the most out of men, but I have n't seen anything much smarter than the way you took hold and handled the Sin Verguenza. Say, who taught you soldiering?"

Appleby stared at him, and then laughed softly when he saw that the man was perfectly serious.

"I never saw a shot fired at a man in my life until I joined the Sin Verguenza," he said. "Still, though I don't know that it has anything to do with the case, most of my folks had their share of fighting, and one was with the Cristinos in Spain."

Harper shook his head. "Never heard of them," he said. "Anyway, if you feel fit for walking you had better come along and get some food. I guess you'll want it, and onions and mangoes don't go very far with me. This place will be very like the pit with the blast on when the Sin Verguenza get their work in."

VIII

APPLEBY'S PRISONER

THE night was pleasantly cool when Cyrus Harding sat with his daughter and the Colonel Morales on the veranda which ran round the patio of the "Four Nations" hostelry in Santa Marta. The hotel was, as usual, built in the shape of a hollow square, and the space enclosed formed a pleasant lounging place when the only light was furnished by the soft glow from the latticed windows surrounding it. That night it fell upon pink-washed walls, clusters of purple Bougainvillea that climbed the trellis, the white blossoms of a magnolia, and a row of carved pillars, while the square of indigo above was set with silver stars. It is true that the stables opened into the patio, as did the kitchen, next door to them, but that was not unusual, and the curious musky smell that hangs over most Spanish towns was tempered by the scent of flowers.

Harding lay in a cane chair, with the blue cigar smoke drifting about him and a little thoughtful smile in his lean face. He was a widower, and, though he now enjoyed a very respectable competence, desired a fortune to bequeath his daughter, which was why he had sunk good money in what his friends considered reckless ventures in Cuba. Harding had, however, taken risks all his life, and knew there is not usually very much to be made by the business man who follows the beaten track. He looked further ahead than his fellows, and taking the chances as they came played for heavier stakes.

His daughter sat a little apart, daintily fresh and cool, in a long white dress, with the soft light of the lamp above her gleaming on her hair, which was of warm brown, and emphasizing the little sparkle in her eyes. The cold of New York did not suit her, and she had accompanied her father to Cuba before. Opposite Harding, across the little table on which stood a flask of wine, sat a spare, olive-faced officer, with a

THE DUST OF CONFLICT.

sword girt to his waist. He had keen dark eyes with a hint of sternness in them, and a straight, thin-lipped mouth; while he was already known in that country as El Espada, Morales the Sword. His mission was to put down the insurrection in that district, and the means he employed were draconic.

"You ask a good many questions, señor," he said in Castilian. "There is no difficulty with respect to some of them, and the information in my possession is at your service; but it is different with those that concern the situation political. We are not sure yet whom you Americans sympathize with; and I am, you understand, an officer of Spain."

Harding made a little deferential gesture, but he also smiled. "One can usually obtain political information of importance in my country — when one is rich enough," he said, as it were, reflectively. "Of course, one avoids hurting anybody's feelings, but it seems to me that the best guarantee we can give of our good will is the fact that some of us are investing our money here."

Morales shook his head. "It is not quite enough," he said. "There are men without money in your country, my friend, and it is those who have nothing that love the revolution. I have also a little affair with two of your estimable countrymen."

Nettie Harding, who understood him, looked up. "Now," she said, "that is interesting! You will tell us about it?"

Morales nodded. "It is a month since we marched east with a strong company and a little machine-gun," he said. "We march by night, and it is sunrise when we climb the Alturas gorge. Above, three leagues away, hides a company of the Sin Verguenza, and the Captain Vincente who marches round will take them in the rear. I have scouts thrown forward, and we march silently, but by and by the front files come running back and there is firing in the pass. The Sin Verguenza, it seems, are upon us, but that is not wise of them. Figure you the place — the rock one cannot climb above us, a barranco, very deep, below, and the machine-gun to sweep the track. Pouf! It is swept. The Sin Verguenza melt away, and we go forward to conclude the affair."

"Well," said Harding a trifle impatiently, "where do the Americans come in?"

Morales' face grew wicked. "Down the rock, my friend.

APPLEBY'S PRISONER

Perhaps they are sailors; for where there is no footing for any man they slide down the lianas, and others follow them. The cazadores do not look above; there is still firing, and they do not hear me. The Americans are upon the gun, and more of the Sin Verguenza arrive behind them. I see one American who is young with his shoulder at the wheel of the gun, and in another minute it is gone, and there is a crash in the barranco. Then the Sin Verguenza come back again, and we go home, my friend; but it is not all my company who come out of Alturas Pass. One waits, however, and by and by my turn comes."

Nettie Harding said nothing, but there was a significant sparkle in her blue eyes, while her father's nod was deprecatory.

"They are not friends of mine, and I have a good deal to lose," he said. "What I want to know is, if you had money to spare would you buy the San Cristoval hacienda? There should be a profit in it at the price, but not if the patriots are likely to burn the sugar mill, or the administration to quarter troops there. You are responsible for this district!"

"Money is very scarce with me, my friend," said Morales dryly.

Harding nodded sympathetically, and dropped his voice to a lower tone. "One would be content with a little less profit if it meant security," he said. "It would pay me to make certain that the hacienda would not be meddled with — by the Sin Verguenza."

There was a little gleam of comprehension in the officer's eyes, and he thoughtfully flicked the ash from his cigar. "I think I could promise that," he said. "We will talk again, señor, but now — if I have your excuses — I think I will be wanted at the cuartel."

He rose, made Miss Harding a little punctilious inclination, and moved away, while the lamplight flung his shadow black upon the pink-washed walls. It seemed to the girl suggestively sinister.

"I do not like that man," she said. "He has wicked eyes, and his face is cruel!"

Harding laughed. "Anyway, it's evident he has his price, and I think I'll buy the hacienda, though I'll want a man to run it, since I can't stay here. He will have to be the right kind of man."

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

Nettie Harding appeared reflective. "I wonder what has become of Mr. Broughton whom we met on board the 'Aurania'?" she said.

"The folks I gave him letters to told me he was here in Cuba; but I'm not quite sure his name was Broughton. He had got himself mixed up in some kind of trouble in England."

"Then," said the girl decisively, "somebody else made the trouble."

"It's quite likely. I don't think there's any meanness in that man; but I wouldn't worry about him. It wouldn't please Julian."

The girl laughed. "Julian," she said, "knows me too well to be jealous."

Harding said nothing, and the two sat silent awhile. There were few guests in the "Four Nations" just then, and only a faint murmur rose from the plaza beyond the pink-washed walls. Somebody, however, was singing, and now and then a soft tinkle of guitars came musically through the stillness with the chorus of the "Campanadas." Nettie Harding listened vacantly, while glancing up at the blue above she wondered whether the same clear stars shone down on a certain naval officer, and if he thought of her as the big warship rolled across the wastes of the Pacific. It was very still, and cool, and peaceful, and she lay, languidly content to dream, in the cane chair, until she straightened herself with a little gasp as the ringing of a rifle came sudden and portentous out of the darkness. It was followed by a crash of firing, and Harding looked up sharply.

"Winchesters — but those are Spanish rifles now!" he said. "It seems the Insurgents must have got in behind the pickets."

"The Insurgents!" said the girl, with a shiver.

Harding rose, and stood looking down upon her curiously grave in face. "This is a thing I never expected. Morales told me there was n't a rebel within ten leagues of us; but he has men enough to whip them off," he said. "Put on a jacket, Nettie. We can see what is going on from the roof."

In another minute they stood looking down over the low parapet into the shadowy plaza. There was not a light in it now, but through the ringing of the bugles there rose a con-

APPLEBY'S PRISONER

fused clamor and the patter of running feet, and Nettie Harding could dimly see clusters of citizens apparently making the best pace they could towards the calle that led out of Santa Marta. As she watched a line of figures broke through them, and by their rhythmic tramp she guessed that these were soldiery. Then a fresh mob of citizens poured into the plaza, and the rifles crashed again.

"What does it mean?" she asked.

Harding, stooping over the parapet, listened a moment to the confused voices, and then shook his head. "I'm afraid it's the Sin Verguenza coming," he said. "They have a little account against Santa Marta, and I would n't like to be Morales when they send in the bill."

His attitude betokened strained attention, and the girl fancied he was endeavoring to ascertain how the troops had fared. Then the clamor grew suddenly louder, and she grasped his arm.

"Oh!" she said. "They are in the town!"

"Yes," said Harding curtly, "I guess they are. The sooner we leave them and the Santa Martans to it the better! Get your little trinkets together, Nettie; I'll have the mules we hired ready inside five minutes."

He plunged down the stairway, burst through the negroes already clamoring about the stable, and dragged the mules out. There was a crowd in the archway leading out of the patio when the girl joined him.

"We can't mount here," he said. "Keep close behind me until we make the plaza."

It was accomplished with difficulty, but the men who pressed upon them saw the glinting pistol; and Nettie Harding stood ready to mount in the plaza when a mob of fugitives surged about them. There was a crash of riflery very close at hand, the mule plunged, and she reeled backwards with a little cry. For a moment she felt her father's grasp upon her shoulder, then the mules seemed to vanish and Harding with them, and she was driven forward amidst the press. A voice she recognized was shouting a few yards away, but it ceased suddenly, and she was jostled this way and that with the little breath she had left almost crushed out of her. She could only move as the crowd did, and it bore her onward into a dark calle, where screaming women were pouring from the door-

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

ways, and here and there a pale light shone down upon the terrified faces about her, but there was no sign of Harding anywhere.

She could never remember how long this lasted; but by and by the crowd seemed to melt away where two or three streets branched off from a smaller plaza, and she stood still, breathless, striving to draw the thin jacket, whose buttons had been torn away, over the trinkets she had hastily clasped into her bodice and cast about her neck. Then the venomous clang-ing of rifles commenced again, and when something zip-zapped along the stones and struck the white walls with a curious splashing sound she turned to run and saw a dusky archway in front of her. Stumbling into it, she flung back the great leather curtains, and found herself in a little church. It smelt of stale incense, and a few pale lights that only intensified the darkness blinked here and there; but she could hear low rustlings which seemed to indicate that others had taken refuge in it, and shrank into a corner.

She fancied she spent at least an hour in the church, listening with apprehension to the clamor that broke out and sank again outside. There were murmurs inside the building, and an occasional rustling of the leather curtains, but this told her nothing; and at last, unable to bear the suspense any longer, she moved softly towards the door. The town was almost silent when she reached it, and there was a light burning in what appeared to be a wine shop across the plaza. She could also hear laughter as well as the tinkle of a guitar; and as this did not indicate fear she decided to enter the shop and endeavor to hire somebody to search for her father. Unfortunately, however, she did not remember a saying common in Spain respecting the fondness of evil-livers for the sound of church bells.

She flitted across the plaza without molestation, and then stopped in front of a building which bore a scroll announcing that it was a café. A blaze of light shone out from it, and looking in between the wooden pillars she could see the little tables and wine barricas. Then she gasped, for in place of reputable citizens the tables were occupied by women with powdered faces in cheap bravery and ragged men with rifles slung behind them. The light also showed her standing white in face with torn garments and the jewels sparkling at her

APPLEBY'S PRISONER

neck to the revellers ; and a man of dusky skin, with a machete hanging at his belt, sprang up with a shout.

There was a burst of laughter, and Nettie Harding fled, with the patter of several pairs of feet growing louder behind her, until two men came forward to meet her. They, however, let her pass ; there was an altercation, and she stood still, trembling, when a cry in English reached her. Then she saw three or four dim figures moving back towards the café and the two men coming towards her. One of them also raised a hand to his big shapeless hat.

"I scarcely think they will trouble you any more," he said in Castilian, which Nettie could understand.

She said nothing for a moment, but stood still looking at the men, and wondering whether they could be trusted. She could, however, see very little of them, and found a difficulty in expressing herself in Castilian.

"Can you tell me whether the Hotel Cuatro Naciones is safe?" she asked in faltering English. "I lost my companion leaving it."

"I scarcely think it is," said one of the men, whose accentuation was unmistakably English. "You were staying there?"

"Yes," said Nettie. "My father was separated from me by the crowd."

One of the men said something she did not hear to his comrade, while just then a cry of alarm came out of the darkness, and was followed by a rush of feet. Then the man who had spoken turned to her again.

"I'm afraid you can't stay here," he said, with evident perplexity.

As he spoke a crowd of shadowy men surged about them, but he called out angrily in Castilian, and before she quite realized what he was doing drew the girl's hand beneath his arm. Then there was laughter and a shout : "Excuses, Don Bernardino. Pass on, comrades!"

Nettie would have snatched her hand free, but the man held it fast with a little warning pressure, and she went on with him, partly because his voice had been deferential and puzzlingly familiar, and also because it was evident that she could not get away. They went up a calle, where another band of roysterers came clamoring to meet them, until the

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

man led her under an archway where a lamp was burning. Then he gravely dropped her hand, and Nettie gasped as she stared at him. He was burned to the color of coffee, his shoes were burst, and his garments, which had evidently never been intended to fit him, were mostly rags, but his face reminded her of the man she had met on board the "Aurania."

"It is perhaps not astonishing that you don't seem to recognize me, Miss Harding," he said. "You have no idea where your father can have gone to?"

"No," said the girl, with a little tremor of relief. "He must be in the town, and I would be very grateful if you could take me to him. Of course, I know you now."

"Is your father Cyrus Harding — Sugar Harding — of New York?" the other man broke in.

"Yes," said the girl, and the man drew his comrade aside.

"You and I have got to see her through, and your quarters would be the safest place," he said.

Appleby stared at him as he asked, "Have you taken leave of your senses, Harper?"

"No," said his companion dryly. "I guess they're where they are of most use to me. Everybody's entitled to what he can pick up to-night, and there are not many of the Sin Ver-guenza would dispute your claim. It's beginning to strike you?"

"I hope it will not strike Miss Harding too," said Appleby, whose face flushed. "Still, I can think of nothing else."

Then he went back slowly to where the girl was standing.

"I fancy I can find you shelter if you will trust yourself to me; and when your father asks any of my men about you they will send him to you," he said. "It is, however, necessary that you should take my arm."

Nettie flashed a swift glance at him, but the man was regarding her steadily with gravely sympathetic eyes, and it was with a curious intuitive confidence she moved away with him. They passed bands of roysterers and houses with shattered doors, and finally entered a patio littered with furniture. An olive-faced man with a rifle stood on guard in it, and the color swept into the girl's face as she saw his grin; but he let them pass, and Appleby went on, moving stiffly, and very grim in

APPLEBY'S PRISONER

face, up a stairway that led to a veranda. There he took down a lantern that hung on a lattice, and gave it the girl as he pointed to a door.

"There is a strong bolt inside," he said in a curiously even voice. "I do not know of any other place in Santa Marta where you would be as safe to-night."

Nettie turned with a little shiver, and looked down into the patio. There were lights behind most of the lattices, and she could hear loud laughter and the clink of glasses, while here and there ragged figures with rifles showed up on the veranda. Then she straightened herself with an effort and looked steadily at Appleby. He stood wearily before her, very ragged, and very disreputable as far as appearance went, but he did not avoid her gaze.

"Where am I?" she asked, with a faint tremor in her voice.

"I believe this was the Alcalde's house. It is occupied by the Insurgent leaders now."

"Then," said the girl, with a little gasp, "why did you bring me here?"

"I can escort you back to the plaza if you wish it," said Appleby quietly. "Still, you would be running serious risks, and I believe I can answer for your security here. You see, I am an officer of the Sin Verguenza."

Nettie gasped again, and once more shot a swift glance at him. Appleby was standing very still, and save for the weariness in it his face was expressionless. Then without a word she turned and went into the room, while Harper smiled softly when he heard the bolt shot home. The room, she found, was evidently a sleeping chamber, for there was a cheap iron bedstead in it, and articles of male attire were scattered about the floor. From the quantity of them, and the manner in which they were lying, it also appeared that somebody had been endeavoring to ascertain which would fit him. Then Nettie, remembering the rags the man wore, sat down somewhat limply with burning cheeks in the single chair, until a little burst of meaningless laughter that was tinged with hysteria shook her.

In the meanwhile Appleby dropped into a cane chair further along the veranda and laid his rifle across his knees. "My head's aching, and I can't see quite straight," he said. "See

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

if you can get me a little wine somewhere, Harper. Then you had better go along and find out what those rascals of mine are after, and if anybody has seen Harding."

Harper shook his head. "I guess I've had 'bout enough of them for one night, and if any indignant citizen slips a knife into one of them it's not going to be a great loss to anybody," he said. "You know who that girl is?"

"Miss Nettie Harding. I met her on the 'Aurania' coming out."

Harper smiled. "Well," he said reflectively, "it's not every day one of the Sin Verguenza is honored with the custody of a young woman who lives in one of the smartest houses on the Hudson. It strikes me there's money in the thing, and I'm going to stop right here, and be handy when Sugar Harding comes along, though I don't know that he'd think much of me as a chaperon in this outfit."

"Get me some wine," said Appleby, while the bronze deepened in his forehead. "I have got to keep awake, and don't feel inclined for any foolery."

Harper went away chuckling, and Appleby sat still. The blow he had received in the attack had shaken him, and he had spent that day and most of the night before it in forced marching. It was some time before Harper returned, and in the meanwhile the Captain Maccario came up the stairway. He stopped in front of Appleby, and shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"The señorita is disdainful, then?" he said.

Appleby devoutly hoped Miss Harding did not understand Castilian, and attempted no explanation. He had more than a suspicion that it would not be credited, but his face was a trifle grim when he looked up at his comrade.

"There are times when a wise man asks no questions, my friend," he said. "If any one tries to get into the room I have taken to-night he will be sorry."

Maccario, who was an easy-going Andalusian, laughed somewhat significantly, and Appleby, glancing at the half-opened lattice, wondered with unpleasant misgivings whether Miss Harding had heard him. As it happened, she had, and clenched her hands as she listened. Still, even then she remembered that the man who had brought her there had said there was no place in Santa Marta where she would be more

APPLEBY'S PRISONER

secure. It seemed a bold assertion, but she felt that it could be credited.

"Well," said the Spaniard, whose eyes still twinkled, "we march at sunrise, and there are richer prizes than pretty faces to be picked up to-night. The others are busy collecting them. Is it wise to lose one's chances for a señorita who is unsympathetic?"

The humorous Maccario came very nearly receiving a painful astonishment just then, but by an effort Appleby kept his temper. "My money is my friend's, but not my affairs," he said. "Tell your men if they can find an American with blue eyes to bring him here. It will be worth their while."

Maccario tossed a handful of cigars into his comrade's knees. "The Colonel Morales smokes good tobacco, and they were his. If we find the American we will send him to you. It is by misfortune we do not find the Colonel Morales."

He went away, and by and by Harper came back with a flask of red wine and a roll of matting, which he spread out at the top of the stairway.

"I'm pretty big, and anybody who treads on me will get a little surprise," he said. "You have just got to say 'Gun-boat' if you want me."

He was apparently asleep in five minutes, but Appleby lay motionless in his chair with every sense alert. The laughter and hum of voices had died away, and only an occasional hoarse shouting rose from the town. His eyes were fixed on the patio, and his hands, which were hard and brown, clenched on the rifle; but his thoughts were far away in a garden where the red beech leaves strewed the velvet grass in peaceful England, and it was not Nettie Harding's blue eyes, but Violet Wayne's calm gray ones that seemed to look into his. Harper's words by the camp fire were bearing fruit, and he was ready to admit now that it was a woman who had sent him there. There was also satisfaction in the thought that he was serving her, which was the most he could look for, since his part was to give and not expect, but he felt that she would approve of what he was doing then. So the time slipped by; while Nettie Harding, still sitting behind the lattice, now and then raised her head and looked at him. His attitude betokened his watchfulness, and with a little sigh of relief she sank back into her chair again. That ragged figure

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

with the grim, brown face seemed an adequate barrier between her and whatever could threaten her.

At last there was a trampling below, and several dusky men staggering suggestively came up the stairway. The girl heard the sound, and shivered as she watched them, until a gaunt figure rose up from beneath their feet. Then they stopped, and one of them fell down the steps and reeled with a crash against a pillar at the bottom.

"You can stop there. There is plenty of room in the stable," said a voice; and when Appleby flung up a hand commandingly the men went away, and there was quietness again.

How long it lasted Nettie did not know, for, though she had no intention of doing so, she went to sleep, and did not hear a man come up the stairway. He had a lean face and keen blue eyes, but there was tense anxiety in them now. Appleby, who rose up, signed Harper to step aside, and in another moment the two men stood face to face — one of them dusty and worn and ragged, the other in what had been a few hours earlier immaculate dress.

"Where is my daughter?" said the latter. "There's five hundred dollars for any one who will bring her to me."

Appleby smiled a little. "She is here."

The other man shook visibly and clenched his hand, but Appleby moved out of the shadow so that his face was visible, and the American's grew quietly stern.

"Then you shall pay for this," he said.

"Had n't you better speak to Miss Harding first?" said Appleby. "Knock at the door in front of you. I believe it is bolted inside."

Harding struck the door. There was a little cry of terror that changed to one of joyful surprise, the door swung open, and the man went inside. It was five minutes later when he came out again, and he had a wallet in his hand when he stopped before Appleby. Then he started.

"Good Lord!" he said. "It's Broughton."

Appleby nodded, and saw that Harding was fumbling at the wallet. "No," he said. "I would not like you to spoil the acquaintance I am rather proud of, sir."

Harding's face was flushed as he grasped his hand. "Well," he said, "I guess the bills are n't printed that could pay you

APPLEBY'S PRISONER

for what you have done for me. Can't you say something that's appropriate, Nettie?"

"No," said the girl quietly, though there was a faint gleam in her eyes. "That contract is too big for me. Still, I hope you did not lose many opportunities, Mr. Broughton, through taking care of me."

Appleby turned to Harding hastily. "I hope you did not have any trouble with our men?"

"No," said Harding. "It was some time before I saw them. A mob of citizens swept me away, and when I got clear of them one of Morales' officers came up mounted with a few men. He went off at a gallop, but shouted to a sergeant to take care of me, and the fool did it too efficiently. He was from Mallorca, and could n't understand my Spanish, but dragged me along with him. It was an hour before I could get away, and I spent the rest of the night running up and down the town until some of your comrades found me."

Appleby nodded. "My friend here will take a few files and go with you to your hotel," he said. "Our men will have loaded themselves with all they can carry, and are scarcely likely to trouble you now. We leave at sunrise."

Harding stood silent for a moment or two, and then said slowly, "Can't you find anything better than this to do?"

"The Sin Verguenza took me in, and treated me tolerably well," said Appleby. "I feel bound to stay with them until they have made their footing good, anyway."

Harper nodded. "When you feel that you can leave them come to me," he said. "I don't want to lose sight of you."

He shook hands again, and went away with Harper and the girl; but it was scarcely two hours later when his daughter and he stood upon the flat roof of the "Four Nations," while a long line of men with rifles, who were no longer ragged, marched out of Santa Marta. One who marched with the second company looked up and waved his hand to them.

"That," said Harding gravely, "is a straight man, and he will do something by and by when he has an opportunity. It is not going to be my fault if he does n't get one."

IX

THE BREAKING OF THE NET

THERE was no wind, and the night was very still, when Appleby lay aching in every limb behind an aloe hedge which cut off the dim white road. Harper sat on the steaming earth close beside him contemplatively munching the end of a cigar, for smoking was distinctly inadvisable just then, and he was in need of something to stay the pangs of hunger. Here and there a dusky figure showed among the leaves, and now and then a low murmur or a soft rustling rose from the black shadow of the overhanging palms; but the scarcely audible sound sank once more into the silence, and a muleteer had just passed along the dusty road apparently without the faintest suspicion that rather more than a hundred famishing men had watched him with fingers tightening on their rifle barrels. He saw and heard nothing, which was fortunate for him, and now his voice and the tramp of his team came back faintly across the cane.

The dew was heavy, as it usually is in the tropics when a clear, still night follows a day of scorching heat, and Appleby could have wrung it from the garments he had borrowed from the Alcalde's wardrobe at Santa Marta. That, however, did not trouble him, for they rested with a pleasant coolness upon his sun-scorched skin; and he was mainly conscious of a sense of emptiness and a distressful stitch in his side as he watched the strip of road. It wound out from the inky shadows of the palms, led by the hedge of aloes, and was lost again in the cane that stretched away, a dim sweep of dusky green, under the moon. It was at least a week since he had had an adequate meal, and he had passed that day crawling through a mangrove swamp, where pits of foul black mire lay beneath the great slimy roots.

Haste and concealment had, however, appeared advisable to the Sin Verguenza; for their success at Santa Marta had

THE BREAKING OF THE NET

brought two strong battalions upon their trail, and Morales had decreed their extermination. Cut off from the hills, they had taken to a belt of reeking mangrove swamps, and Morales, who was too wise to venture his raw troops in those dim haunts of fever, had persistently drawn his net tighter about them. They had accordingly divided when supplies ran out, and the Captain Maccario, who did not know whether the rest had succeeded in breaking through, had halted those who remained with him to wait until the moon sank before making a dash for another tract of jungle. They were, indeed, almost too weary to drag themselves any further just then, and their leader had reason for believing there was a company of caza-dores somewhere upon the road.

He lay a little apart from Appleby, and raised his head so that the moonlight shone into his face, which showed intent and anxious, when a palm frond rustled behind them. There was nothing astonishing in this, but when the rustle repeated itself it seemed to Appleby that there was something curiously persistent in the sound. He glanced at the Spaniard, who saw him, and raised one hand as if in warning. The sound ceased, and there was once more an impressive silence, which lasted for some minutes. Then Appleby felt Harper's hand upon his shoulder.

"Look!" he said in a hoarse whisper, and his comrade set his lips as he turned his head.

A man who had appeared without a sound stood in the white road, his rigid figure forced up sharp and black against it, and it was evident that he was peering about him. Then, with a swiftness that had its significance, he slipped back into the shadow, and moved through it, stopping a second or two now and then as though to listen. Appleby could just see him, and felt a little shiver run through him, for he knew the loyalist scout was running a horrible risk. He hoped the man would see nothing, for the last thing the Sin Verguenza desired was to chance a rifle shot just then. He, however, came on, treading softly and stooping as though to observe the dew-clogged dust, until he stopped again where a little pathway led in among the aloes.

Then he straightened himself, looked behind him, and turning his head stared into the shadow of the palms that lay black and impenetrable beyond the aloes, while the moonlight shone

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

down into his face. It showed white and set against the dusky background; and Appleby, who could see the intent eyes, held his breath, for he knew the man's life hung trembling in the balance. One step would take him to his death, for another face that was drawn and haggard and had the stamp of hunger on it showed amidst the leaves behind him. The suspense lasted for a space of seconds, and Appleby felt himself quivering under the tension, until the man made a sudden movement, as though something suspicious had caught his eyes. Then there was a rustle of leaves, a shadowy form sprang, and the scout went down; while Appleby, who saw a flash in the moonlight, turned his head away. He heard a strangled groan and a struggling amidst the leaves, and then there was once more an impressive silence.

"Two dollars, señor!" said a dusky man breathlessly, as he came up to the Captain Maccario; and the Spaniard made a curious little gesture as he glanced at Appleby.

"You can keep them. Drag him away!" he said in Castilian. "It is the fortune of war, Don Bernardino!"

Appleby said nothing, but Harper turned to the officer. "The troops will not be far behind," he said. "Will we get through?"

Maccario shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows?" he said. "It is certain the cazadores come, but if they march past us the road is open. It is by misfortune we do not know how many there are of them."

"Where are we going if we do get through?" asked Harper.

Maccario stretching out a brown hand swept it vaguely round the horizon. "Here and there and everywhere. The Sin Verguenza will vanish until they are wanted again. There are too many troops in this country, and it is not difficult to find a hundred men when they are together; but it is different when you chase them one by one. So Morales stamps out the insurrection, and when he sends half his troops away we come back again."

"It is not very evident how we are going to live in the meanwhile," said Appleby dryly.

Maccario laughed. "What is mine is my friend's, and there is a poor house at your service. One could reach it in a week's march, and once there we are short of nothing. This is, you understand, a grateful country."

THE BREAKING OF THE NET

There was light enough for Appleby to see the roguish twinkle in the Spaniard's dark eyes, and he shook his head. "No," he said. "While I fought with the Sin Verguenza I lived as they did, but it would not suit me to lie idle and levy contributions upon the country."

"Well," said Maccario reflectively, "in the meanwhile you come with me, and we may, perhaps, find means of sending you back to the sea. Just now I do not know whether any of us will get very far. We have two leagues to make by the carretera before we find cover, and there are cazadores on the road; while the Captain Vincente will be upon us by daylight if we stay here."

The others understood as much already, and it was because they did not know exactly where the cazadores were they were lying there. It was also a somewhat important question, and they lay still waiting for an answer until a faintly rhythmic sound came out of the silence. It sank beyond hearing, but rose again, a trifle louder; and Appleby's heart throbbed as he recognized the tramp of marching men, while a half-articulate sound rose from the Sin Verguenza. They were hungry and very weary, and starvation waited them if they crawled back into the swamps; while the road that led to safety was closed by the troops. It was, however, evident that their leader knew his business, and Appleby fancied that if the detachment was not a strong one they might still break through.

In the meanwhile the rhythmic tramp was steadily growing louder, and he could tell by the stirring of those about him that they were waiting in strained expectancy, until there was a patter of footsteps, and a man came running down the road. He flung himself down gasping beside Maccario, and his voice was breathless as he said, "It is one company only."

"Good!" said Maccario dryly. "If they see nothing it is also well. Then the road will be open from here to Adeje. On the other hand, if they have good eyes it is unfortunate for them."

There was a faint rattle and clicking as the men fidgeted with magazine slide, or snapped open breaches to make sure that a cartridge lay in the chamber. Then an impressive silence followed, which seemed to grow more intense as the

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

tramp of marching men came ringing sharply down the dim white road. Perhaps the officer who led them trusted to the scout who would never bring him a warning back again, or had lately arrived from Spain, and did not know that the man who sought the Sin Verguenza was apt to find them where he least expected. Then a faintly musical jingling and the rattle of wheels became audible too, and Appleby shook his weariness from him as, with the dust rolling about them, dim figures swung into sight round a bend of the road. The carretera was a broad one, and they appeared to be marching carelessly in open fours, for laughter and the hum of voices came out of the dust.

Raising his head a little he glanced behind him, but the Sin Verguenza were ominously still and silent now, and he could only see Maccario's shoulder, and in places a glint of metal where the moonlight sifted down. Again a quiver ran through him, and his heart thumped painfully as he watched the men below through the openings between the aloes. Then he set his lips and grappled with an almost uncontrollable desire to cry out and warn them. He had been hunted by them, and had seen their handiwork in the ashes of burnt aldeas that had given his comrades shelter; but for that Morales was responsible, and the men were for the most part conscripts reft from their homes in Spain, and going with laughter on their lips to their doom. The Sin Verguenza struck at night, in silence, and were seldom contented with a strategical victory. Still, because the rattle of riflery carries far, they held their hand while several loose fours shuffling through the dust went by, and Appleby felt a trifle easier.

Then there was another space of waiting before the dust that had commenced to sift down grew thicker again as the head of the company swung round the bend. They were also marching easily with gaps between the files, and the jingle of sling, swivel, scabbard, and canteen rang through their tramping, while the rifles twinkled as the fours swung across the breadths of moonlight between the shadows of the palms. They were young men, most of them, and some little more than boys; while here and there one or two, still unprovided with tropical outfit, wore the kepi and the cazadores, green; but Appleby had seen the men of the Peninsula fight before, and checked a groan. He was one of the Sin Verguenza, and

THE BREAKING OF THE NET

knew what awaited him if Morales was successful, but the work on hand seemed horrible to him just then.

The tension grew almost insupportable, when one of the soldiers who had a clear voice started the "Campanadas," and the refrain, that spoke of grapes and kisses, rolled from four to four. Melodious as it was it seemed to jar with a horrible discordance upon the silence. Still, there was a chance that the troops might pass unscathed yet if their officers saw nothing, and it was with tingling nerves Appleby watched the fours swing by. Half the company had passed him now.

Then there was a shout from one of the leading fours, and a sharp order, while a man came running along the line; and the files in front of Appleby stood still looking about them. He felt his eyes grow dim, and his fingers quiver on the rifle stock, while his heart throbbed painfully. Then a mounted officer appeared, apparently on a mule; there was another order, though Appleby had no notion what it was, and while the feet commenced to shuffle Maccario cried out.

Appleby felt the rifle butt jar on his shoulder and the barrel jump in his hand, but saw nothing for a moment beyond wisps of drifting smoke. It hung about the aloes and obscured the road, but cries and execrations and orders came out of it, until the rifles of the Sin Verguenza flashed again. What happened to the cazadores was not apparent then, but it was evident that some at least survived, for there was a rush of feet in the smoke, and men with bayonets plunged in among the aloes. They failed to force a passage through the horrible spines, and another blast of riflery met them in the face as they floundered and rent themselves. They had done what men could do, for it was usually a leader's blunder that involved the troops of Spain in defeat, but no flesh and blood unsheltered could face that withering fire, and some went down among the aloes, while the rest flung themselves upon the murderous rifles.

Then the Sin Verguenza came out from their lair, and Appleby swung his hat off as he ran with a mob of ragged men behind him towards a slim, white-clad officer who was standing in the road. It was in Castilian he shouted, but a bitter laugh and the flash of a pistol answered him, and there was a glint of steel as half-seen men rallied about their leader. The rifles, however, flashed again, and the cluster of cazadores melted away as the Sin Verguenza poured out into the road.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

Appleby sprang over the fallen officer, and stood still gasping, and conscious for the first time that his foot was paining him. Shadowy men were flying round the bend of the road, but there were, so far as he could see, very few of them; while the glance he cast round him showed what had happened to the rest.

"It does n't look nice," said Harper, who appeared at his side. "Still, there's a mule team down, and I'm kind of anxious to find out if they brought anything to eat along."

He disappeared again, and Appleby circumspectly took off one of the Alcalde of Santa Marta's shoes. His foot felt hot, and the patches of stocking that clung about it were saturated, but the light was too dim to show him exactly where it was injured; so he shook the moisture from the shoe through a place where the stitches had parted and put it on again, and was standing stiffly with his weight on one leg when Maccario came by.

"You have five minutes to look for anything you may have a fancy for in," he said. "There is, however, it seems, a lamentable scarcity of pesetas among the troops of Spain."

Appleby turned from him with a little gesture of disgust, and Maccario, who shrugged his shoulders, went away again. But the Sin Verguenza were expeditious, and within ten minutes had grouped themselves, with bulging pockets and haversacks made for other men, in straggling fours. Then the word was given, and they swung away at the best pace they could compass down the carretera. It cost Appleby an effort to limp along with his half company, but he managed it for a time, and nobody except Harper seemed to notice when he lagged behind. Then when they were straggling behind the rearmost files those in front halted as a man came up, and a murmur ran along the line.

"Morales with four companies!" said somebody. "Marching by the Adeje cross-road. If they are not deaf, those caza-dores, they have heard the firing!"

"Forward!" Maccario's voice came back. "With Vincente behind us there will be masses needed if we do not pass the Adeje road before Morales."

Then the pace grew faster, and Appleby dropped farther behind, with Harper hanging resolutely at his side. There was very little discipline among the Sin Verguenza at any time,

THE BREAKING OF THE NET

and every man's first care was to save his own neck just then. So little by little the distance grew greater between them and the two lonely men, until when the last of them swept round a bend Appleby stopped altogether and looked at Harper.

"I can't go any farther on one foot. Push on," he said.

Harper laughed a little. "I've a stitch in my side myself, and this kind of gallop takes it out of one. I feel kind of tired of the Sin Verguenza after to-night's work, anyway."

Appleby made a little impatient gesture. "Go on," he said, "go on."

"No, sir. I guess I told you I could n't run."

"I'm dead lame," said Appleby. "You can't carry me."

"Well, I'm not going to try. We'll hustle along, and it's quite likely we'll get somebody to take us in."

Appleby made a last effort, but his voice shook a little as he said, "This is not your business, Harper. You can't do anything for me. Don't be a fool!"

Harper laid a hard hand on his shoulder. "Now, I have no use for arguing. We are white men alone in a heathen country, and you can't help not being an American, anyway. When he's in a tight place I don't go back on my partner. You lean on me, and we'll come to a hole we can crawl into by and by."

He slipped his arm under Appleby's shoulder, and they shuffled on alone down the dim white road. There was silence all about them, and the tramp of the Sin Verguenza came back more and more faintly out of the distance until it ceased altogether.

X

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

IT was almost cold and very still when Appleby looked out from his lair among the cane. Morning had not come, but the clump of trees that had been a mere blur of shadow when he last awakened had grown into definite form, and rose black and solemn against the eastern sky. This was no longer dusky indigo, but of a softer color tinged with a faint pearly gray, while detached stalks of cane seemed to be growing into visibility. Then he stood up with a little shiver, his torn garments clinging about him wet with the dew, and became vaguely conscious that he was very uncomfortable. His limbs ached with weariness, and there was a distressful stiffness in his hip-joint which those who have slept on damp ground are acquainted with, while his foot throbbed painfully.

These sensations, however, vanished, and left him intent and alert, for a sound he recognized came quivering through the still, cool air. It was evident that Harper heard it also, for he rose stiffly, and his face showed faintly white as he turned in the direction of the carretera which ran through the cane some fifty yards away.

"Troops! It's kind of fortunate we crawled in here," he said.

Appleby nodded, for he had passed the greater part of six months hiding from the troops of Spain, and the tramp of marching men was unpleasantly familiar to him, while now, as it grew louder in a dull staccato, it seemed unusually portentous and sinister. The earth lay still and peaceful, wrapped in shadow, while the pearly grayness changed to a pale ruby gleam in the eastern sky; but that beat of human feet jarred dissonantly through nature's harmonies.

It swelled in slow crescendo, a rhythm of desecration, while the thin jingle of steel and a confused rattling that had still a

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

measured cadence also became audible. The two men who heard it sat very still among the cane, until Appleby, who was not usually a prey to apprehensive fancies, started at the clack of Harper's rifle as he snapped down the lever and closed the breach again. The sound seemed to ring about them with a horrible distinctness.

"They seem in a hurry, and that's quite fortunate for us," said Harper. "Anyway, if they see us they're not going to get me while there's anything in the magazine. I've no use for being stood up with my hands tied against a wall."

Appleby said nothing, but his brown fingers stiffened on the wet Marlin rifle, and Harper smiled in a somewhat sardonic fashion when he saw the glint in his half-closed eyes. Reticence is not accounted a virtue in his country, but the Englishman's immobility was eloquent, and his comrade was satisfied that if the worst came they would not start out on the unknown trail alone. Then four by four dim figures swung out of the shadows, and the cane seemed to shiver in unison with their trampling as they went by with a forest of sloped rifles wavering above them. Here and there a mounted officer showed above the rest; while even when the leading fours were lost again in the shadows there seemed no end to them, and there was still no slackening in the sonorous beat of feet. At last, however, laden beasts appeared with men who straggled about them, then two or three more sections with rifles trailed; and Appleby drew in a deep breath when once more the gap between the cane was empty.

"There will be no room for the Sin Verguenza now, and nobody will be likely to take us in," he said. "What is to be done, Harper?"

"Go to sleep!" said the American tranquilly. "I would n't worry about the Sin Verguenza. Quite a few of them have picked up enough to retire on. I wish I had n't handed my haversack to black Domingo when I went back for you. That's what's troubling me."

Appleby laughed, and rolled into the little hollow he had made for himself with the careless disregard of the future which is not infrequently the adventurer's most valuable possession. He also slept soundly, and the sun was high when he awakened with a start to see a man looking down on him. He was dressed in unstarched linen, frayed but very clean,

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

and a big straw hat, while he held a hoe and a basket in one hand, and stood regarding Appleby with grave curiosity.

"There is much sun to-day, señor," he said.

Appleby shifted his hand from the rifle and laid it restrainingly on Harper, who staggered to his feet, for there was something that inspired him with confidence in the man's dark eyes.

"Are there troops on the road?" he asked.

"No," said the man. "None between here and Arucas. The señores are — "

"Friends of liberty!" and Harper grinned as he straightened himself and turned to Appleby. "Had n't you better tell him the question is where can two patriots get anything to eat?"

The man glanced at their haggard faces and torn garments, which were white with dust and clammy with dew.

"Ave Maria!" he said softly, and taking a small loaf from the basket broke it into two pieces. One he held out with a bottle of thin red wine, while he glanced at the other half of the loaf deprecatingly.

"One must eat to work," he said, as if in explanation. "There is always work for the poor, and between the troops and the Sin Verguenza they have very little else here."

A flush crept into Appleby's forehead, and Harper pulled out a few pesetas, which was all he had, but the man shook his head.

"No, señor," he said. "It is for the charity, and one cannot have the liberty for nothing. Still, there are many contributions one must make, and I cannot do more."

Appleby, who understood the significance charity has in Spain, took the provisions and lifted his battered hat as the man turned away; but when he had taken a pace or two he came back again and dropped a little bundle of maize-husk cigarettes and a strip of cardboard matches beside them. Then, without a word, he plodded away down a little path while Harper looked at Appleby with wonder in his eyes.

"I guess there are men like him in every nation, though they're often quite hard to find," he said. "More style about him than a good many of our senators have at home. Well, we'll have breakfast now, and then get on again."

They ate the half loaf and drank the wine; but Harper looked grave when Appleby took off his shoe. His foot

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

seemed badly swollen, but he desisted from an attempt to remove the torn and clotted stocking with a wry smile, and put on the shoe again. Then he limped out into the road and plodded painfully down it under the scorching sun all that morning without plan or purpose, though he knew that while it lay not far from Santa Marta the Insurgents had friends and sympathizers in the aldea of Arucas, which was somewhere in front of them. They met nobody. The road wound away before them empty as well as intolerably hot and dusty, though here and there a group of men at work in the fields stopped and stared at them; and they spent an hour making what Harper called a traverse round a white aldea they were not sure about. Then they lay down awhile in a ruined garden beside the carretera.

There was a nispero tree in the garden laden with acid yellow fruit, and Appleby ate the handful Harper brought him greedily, for he was slightly feverish and grimed with dust. Then they smoked the peasant's maize-husk cigarettes and watched the purple lizards crawl about the fire-blackened ruins of the house. They could hear the rasp of machetes amidst the cane and the musical clink of hoes, while now and then a hum of voices reached them from the village; and once, with a great clatter, a mounted man in uniform went by.

Harper lay still, drowsily content to rest; but those sounds of human activity troubled Appleby. The men who made them had work to do, and a roof to shelter them when their toil was done, but he was drifting aimlessly as the red leaves he had watched from the foot-bridge one winter day in England. Tony stood beside him then, and he wondered vaguely what Tony was doing now — playing the part of gentleman steward to Godfrey Palliser with credit to himself and the good will of his uncle's tenants, riding through English meadows, meeting men who were glad to welcome him in London clubs, or basking in the soft gleam of Violet Wayne's eyes. It was the latter only that Appleby envied him; and he wondered whether Tony, who had so much, knew the full value of the love that had been given him as the crown of all, and then brushed the thoughts away when Harper rose.

"We have got to make Arucas by to-night, or lie out starving, which is a thing I have no use for," he said. "It's quite a long hustle."

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

Appleby rose, and staggered as he placed his weight upon his injured foot, and then, while Harper laid a steady hand on his shoulder, limped out into the carretera. It stretched away before them, white, and hot, and straight, with scarcely a flicker of shadow to relieve its blinding glare; and Appleby half closed his eyes, while the perspiration dripped from Harper's face.

"And it's quite often I've sworn I'd turn farmer and never go to sea again! Well, I guess there are more fools like me!"

Appleby had no observation to make, and they plodded on through a land of silence and intolerable heat. No Latin who can help it works at that hour of the afternoon, and peon and soldier alike lay where there was coolness and shadow wrapped in restful sleep. Only the two aliens crawled on with aching heads and dazzled eyes down the dusty road which rolled back interminably to their weary feet. The cane was no longer green to Appleby, but steeped in yellow glare, the dust gleamed incandescent white, and the sky seemed charged with an overwhelming radiancy.

Still, he limped on, dreaming, while each step cost him agony, of the brown woods at Northrop and the sheen of frost on the red brier leaves in the English lanes, for all that he had seen during that last eventful fortnight there flashed into his memory. He could recall the chill of the night air when he stood looking into the future from the face of the hill as he went to meet keeper Davidson; the sweep of velvet lawn, the song of the robin on the lime bough in the bracing cold of morning, and plainer than all the face of the woman he had made a promise to under the soft light in the conservatory. He did not know what that promise would cost him when he made it; but the woman had read his character, and was warranted in deciding that it would be kept.

No road, however, goes on interminably, and the white aldea of Arucas rose before them when the sun was low. They plodded into it, limping and stumbling over the slippery stones, and frightening the dark-eyed children with their grim faces; for there was a hum of life behind the lattices now, and a cooking of the comida in the patios and in front of the open doors. Harper sniffed hungrily — for the pungent odors of the dark green oil and garlic hung about the flat-topped

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

houses — and finally halted before an archway leading into a shadowy patio. There was a legend above it.

"The Golden Fleece'!" he said. "Well, they'll have some wine here, and I've got five pesetas."

They went in, and when they limped into the guest chamber a man dressed in unstarched linen stared at them aghast.

"Madre de Dios!" he said.

He would apparently have backed away in consternation had not Harper, who slipped between him and the door, stood with his back to it; while Appleby spoke two words softly in Castilian. They were without connection and apparently meaningless, but they carried weight with those who had any hand in the insurrection, and the landlord sat down, evidently irresolute.

"Would you ruin me? The Sin Verguenza are scattered, and Espada Morales is not far away," he said.

"Still," said Appleby dryly, "they are not dead, my friend, and it is only those who are buried that never come back again."

The innkeeper nodded, for the delicacy of the hint as well as the man's accent were thoroughly Castilian.

"Well," he said reflectively, "here one is ruined in any case, and what one gives to the friends of liberty Morales will not get. After all, it is but a handful of beans or an omelet, and it is golden onzas those others would have from me."

"If eggs are not too dear here we can pay," said Appleby, with a laugh, and turned to see that Harper was glancing at him reproachfully.

It was evident that the innkeeper saw him, too, for a little smile came into his eyes. "Then it is seldom so with the Sin Verguenza," he said. "Doubtless your companion is one of them."

"Silver is scarce with the Sin Verguenza," said Appleby. "Still, there are debts they pay with lead."

The innkeeper set food before them — beans and oil, an omelet, and a bottle of thin red wine from the Canaries. He also somewhat reluctantly produced a few cigars of a most excellent tobacco; and Harper sighed with pure content when he dropped into a big raw-hide chair when the meal was over.

"Now I could 'most be happy if I knew when we would strike another place like this," he said. "Still, it's quite

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

plain to me that we can't stay here. There are too many cazadores prowling up and down this carretera."

It was equally evident to Appleby, but, crippled as he was, he could find no answer to the question how he was to drag himself any farther, and he lay still, considering the chances of their being given a hidden bed in a forage loft, until there was a great clatter on the stones outside. Harper was on his feet in a moment, and sprang to the window grim in face, but once there he laughed.

"Only a carriage with a man and a woman in it," he said. "You let me do the talking if old yellow-face wants to turn us out of here. Anyway, if I go, what's left of the wine goes with me."

To make sure of this he slipped the bottle into his pocket, and turned discreetly when the landlord came in.

"By permission, gentlemen, I will show you another room," he said.

"This one will serve quite well," said Harper in Castilian.

The landlord concealed his impatience by a gesture of depreciation. "Comes a rich American and a lady," he said. "These people are, it seems, fastidious, but they pay me well."

"An American," said Harper condescendingly. "Well, we are equal there in my country, and I do not object to his company. You can show him in."

It was too late for the innkeeper to expostulate, for a man in white duck and a girl in a long white dress came into the room, while Appleby set his lips when he recognized the latter. He was ragged, dirty, and unkempt, while one shoe was horribly crusted, and it was very much against his wishes to encounter Nettie Harding a second time in much the same condition. Harper, however, appeared in no way disconcerted, and stepped forward, a dilapidated scarecrow, with the bottle neck projecting suggestively from his pocket.

"Come right in, Mr. Harding," he said. "It's quite pleasant to meet a countryman in this forlorn land."

Harding smiled dryly, but his daughter turned to Appleby with a gleam of compassion in her eyes and held out her hand.

"We are very glad to meet you, Mr. Broughton," she said.

Appleby felt grateful for the tactful kindness which restrained any sign of astonishment, but Harding laughed.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

"I never go back upon anything my daughter says, but I don't know that I'm sorry we shall not be honored with the company of any more of the Sin Verguenza," he said. "We have ordered *comida*, and should be pleased if you will sit down with us."

Appleby would have excused himself, but Harper broke in, "The Sin Verguenza have gone, and it's not going to worry me if they never come back again. As to the other question, I can generally find a use for a dinner, and if my company's any pleasure be glad to throw it in."

Appleby would have offered an explanation, but Harper silenced him by a gesture, and the landlord came in with the viands.

"Bring more plates. These gentlemen will eat with me," said Harding.

The landlord appeared astonished, and stared at Harper with bewildered incredulity, until Nettie Harding, who was quick-witted, laughed, and the bronze grew deeper in Appleby's cheeks. Harper, however, was by no means disconcerted.

"Well," he said naively, "out of compliment to your father I'll worry through another one. You see, it may be quite a long while before we get a meal again."

They sat down, and while Appleby said very little Harding talked tactfully of England and America, and made no allusion to anything that concerned Cuba. Harper seconded him ably, for there was, as usual with his countrymen, no diffidence in him; and Appleby wondered whether there was any reason for Miss Harding's curious little smile. Then when the fruit was removed Harding closed the door and took out his cigar case.

"Take a smoke. Miss Harding does not mind!" he said.

Appleby made excuses, but Harper laid the cigars the landlord had supplied them with on the table.

"You'll try one of these," he said. "I think they're good."

Harding lighted a cigar, and then it seemed to Appleby that a change came over his attitude, though he also fancied that Miss Harding had expected it.

"They are," he said. "You got them cheap?"

There was no mistaking the significance of his tone, and Appleby straightened himself a trifle. Still, he felt he could not well rebuke the man whose dinner he had just eaten.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"Is n't that a little beyond the question, sir?" he asked quietly.

"I don't quite know that it is. I'm going to talk now, and it may save time and worry if I put it straight. What's the matter with the Sin Verguenza?"

"Busted!" said Harper. "Smashed up a company of cazadores, and lit out. Nobody's going to worry over them."

"Which is why you are here?"

"You've hit it right off," said Harper.

"If you feel inclined to tell me anything more I'll listen."

Appleby, who resented the man's tone as much as he was astonished at it, was about to observe that he felt no inclination to trespass further on his host's patience, but he fancied there was a warning in Nettie Harding's eyes, and Harper did not wait for him. He at once launched into an ornate account of the affray, and discreetly mentioned their present difficulties. Harding listened gravely, and then turned to Appleby.

"I have a Spanish sugar grower to visit, and you will excuse me, but I would like to see you again before you leave the hotel," he said. "Anyway, it would n't be quite safe for you to take the road just now."

He went out with his daughter, and when they were in the patio the girl looked at him. "You have got to do something for them," she said quietly.

"Yes," said Harding, with a little nod, "I am going to. As it happens, it will suit me."

It was an hour later when they came back, and as the light was fading Harding bade the landlord bring a lamp before he sat down, and turned to Appleby and Harper, who were somewhat anxiously waiting him.

"You are scarcely likely to know anything about growing or crushing sugar, Mr. Broughton?" he said.

"No, sir. Nothing whatever."

"Thank you!" said Harding, and glanced with a little smile at Harper. "I guess it's not necessary to ask you."

"No," said Harper tranquilly. "I know a little about anything there's money in, and what I don't I can learn. Bernardino's going to show himself 'most as quick as me. It's only modesty that's wrong with him."

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

"Well," said Harding dryly, "he's an Englishman. Now, Mr. Broughton, in one sense your friend is right. Adaptability is the quality we most appreciate; and a good many men in my country, including myself, have made quite a pile out of businesses they knew very little about when they took hold of them. Well, I want a straight man, with good nerves and a cool head, to run a sugar estate for me. I don't want him to cut the cane or oil the machinery — that will be done for him; but he will have to hold my interests safe, and see I'm not unduly squeezed by the gentlemen who keep order here. If he robs me on his own account he will probably hear of it. Are you willing to take hold on a six months' trial?"

"There is a difficulty."

"Your partner? That got over, you would be willing?"

"Yes," said Appleby. "I should be devoutly thankful, too."

Harding turned to Harper. "I have a kind of notion I have seen you before. I don't mean in Santa Marta."

"Oh yes," said Harper, grinning. "You once had a deal with me. I ran you in a load of machinery without paying duty."

"You did. I fancied you would have had reasons for preferring not to remember it."

Harper laughed. "Now, it seems to me the fact that I came out ahead of Cyrus Harding ought to be a testimonial. I was fighting for my own hand then, but I never took anything I wasn't entitled to from the man who hired me — at least, if I did I can't remember it."

"Don't try it again," said Harding, with a little grim smile. "In this case, I think it would be risky. Well, I guess I can find a use for you too, but the putting you together increases the steepness of the chances you are taking. Does that strike you?"

"Yes, sir," said Appleby. "Still, I am afraid you must take both or neither."

Harding laughed. "Then I'll show you the place and what your business will be before we argue about the salary. In the meanwhile here are five dollars. Go out and buy hats, but no clothing yet. We'll get that later. Then walk out of the village, and wait for me out of sight along the carretera.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

You need n't be bashful about taking the dollars. They will be deducted from your salary."

They went out and bought the hats, and had just time to spring clear of the road when two or three mounted officers trotted by. Five minutes later the officers pulled up at the hotel, and Harding, who met them in the patio, recognized Espada Morales in one who saluted him.

"You have had a pleasant drive?" he said. "The Señorita Harding I trust is well?"

Harding nodded, though he was not pleased to notice that the officer's dark eyes wandered round the patio and as though in search of somebody.

"She will be gratified to hear of your inquiry," he said. "We are going back now, and there is a kindness you could do me. I am taking two new servants to the San Cristoval sugar mill, and you may have troops or pickets who would stop us on the road."

Morales tore a slip from a little pad he took from his pocket, scribbled across it, and handed it to Harding.

"If you are questioned show them that," he said. "When you desire any other service I am at your command."

Harding took the paper and told his driver to get the mules out, while ten minutes after he and his daughter left the hotel he bade the man pull up beside two figures standing in the road. They got into the carriage when he signed to them.

"If you had waited a little longer you might have met Morales face to face, Mr. Broughton, and that foot of yours would probably have convicted a more innocent man," he said. "As it is, I have a pass from him that will prevent anybody worrying you until we reach San Cristoval."

Then the driver flicked the mules, and they rolled swiftly forward into the soft darkness that now hid the cane and dimmed the long white road.

XI

THE ALCALDE'S BALL

CYRUS HARDING thoroughly understood the importance of trifles, and possessed a quick insight, which went far to insure the success of whatever he took in hand. It was because of this he picked Appleby and Harper up by the roadside in place of driving away with them from the "Golden Fleece," and seized the opportunity of obtaining a pass from Colonel Morales. The driver was in his service, and Harding had discovered one or two facts concerning him which rendered a hint that his silence would be advisable tolerably effective. Thus no questions were asked them when they were twice stopped by a patrol, and skirting Santa Marta in the darkness they reached the San Cristoval hacienda without attracting undesirable attention.

Next morning Harding also drove back to Santa Marta and purchased clothing, apparently for himself, so that when his new assistants made their appearance there was nothing about them that was likely to excite anybody's curiosity; while the doctor who dressed Appleby's foot was allowed to surmise that it had been injured in the crushing mill. He had, it was suspected, liberationist sympathies, so that it was of no great importance that he was not quite convinced. Appleby, being installed as general manager, showed a facility of comprehension and an administrative ability that would probably have astonished any one who had not Harding's talent for handling men; and when some little time had passed the latter left him in charge without misgivings while he made a business visit to New York. As he purposed to return promptly he also left his daughter with the wife of the Spanish banker at Santa Marta, and it was about that time the Alcalde of the latter place gave a ball to celebrate certain successes of the Spanish arms. The Sin Verguenza had disappeared, and there was at least every outward sign of tranquillity in that district.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

That was how it came about that Appleby and Miss Harding, who had seen a good deal of each other in the meanwhile, sat out in the moonlight on a veranda of the Alcalde's house overlooking the patio. It was filled with flowers, and in place of the Sin Verguenza's revelry the tinkle of guitars, swish of costly dresses, light patter of feet, and decorous laughter came out from the open windows that blazed with light. Nettie Harding was also now attired as became her station, and the soft shimmer of pearls emphasized the whiteness of her neck. Still, she remembered the last time she had entered that patio, and a faint tinge of color came into her cheek as her eyes rested for a moment on the veranda above them. As it happened, Appleby, without intending it, met her eyes a moment later, and each realized what the other's thoughts were. The man turned his head suddenly, but he felt he could not gaze across the patio indefinitely, and when he looked round again he saw the girl had laid her fan upon her knee and was regarding him curiously.

"There is a difference, is there not?" she said.

Appleby sat still, feeling distinctly uncomfortable, and wondering what was expected of him, though he was not altogether astonished, because he knew Nettie Harding's spirit.

"Yes," he said. "The place is a good deal prettier now. These folks have quite an artistic taste, you know."

The girl laughed softly. "Oh yes. Still, do you never come out of your shell? We, as you may have noticed, are rather fond of doing so, and at least occasionally say what we think."

Appleby hoped he appeared unconcerned, for, though he knew Miss Harding could be daring, he could not quite decide whether she had quite understood the position on that eventful night, and hoped she had not.

"The difference you mention is at least to my advantage," he said. "You may remember that I was a ragged outcast then."

"And now, I think, you are on the way to prosperity. You have made a good friend — Mr. Appleby."

Appleby started. He had felt it incumbent on him to give Harding an outline of his story, and had, at the latter's recommendation, applied for a *cedula personale*, or certificate of nationality, which it was desirable for aliens to possess just

THE ALCALDE'S BALL

then, in his own name; but it had not occurred to him that Harding might be communicative. Still, a curious friendship or camaraderie, of a kind that would have been scarcely possible in England, had sprung up between him and the girl, and he saw that she expected something of him.

"I hope I have made two," he said. "Indeed, I fancy I owe the improvement in my affairs to the second one."

"Would n't it be more flattering to consider how much was due to your own abilities?"

Appleby laughed. "I was never considered clever, but I am not quite a fool. There is, one surmises, no scarcity of talented young Americans, and I fancy a good many of them would be glad to serve Cyrus Harding. Still, I don't know anybody I would sooner take a kindness from."

"You will have to deserve it, and that implies a question. The Sin Verguenza may come back again?"

"You want the question answered?" said Appleby.

"Yes," said Nettie. "There are disadvantages in a divided allegiance."

"Well," said Appleby slowly, "I hope the decision I think you are alluding to will never be forced on me, for I have had sufficient of the Sin Verguenza. While I take Cyrus Harding's money I accept the obligation that goes with it; but when I was starving, and did not know where I would be safe from the cazadores, the Sin Verguenza fed me, and I think I owe them something."

Nettie Harding smiled and shook her head reproachfully, but there was a little gleam in her eyes. "They fed you!" she said. "Now, there are men in my country who would have expressed themselves much more artistically. Still, you would have felt ashamed, would n't you, if you had given yourself away? Do you know there is one reason why you made a second friend? You are like Julian, and when you meet him you will have a third who will, though he may not tell you so eloquently, remember what you have done for him."

Appleby sat silent, as he usually did when in doubt. He was not a vain man or apt to lose his head, while the one woman he might have fallen in love with was far away in England; but he knew who Julian was, and wondered whether Miss Harding had meant to supply him with a useful hint. In

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

the meanwhile the swish of dresses, patter of feet, and tinkle of guitars grew louder, and drowned the soft splashing of the fountain among the flowers.

"That sounds very pretty," he said. "Have you noticed that there is something curious but alluring in Spanish music? They got it from the East, I think."

Nettie laughed. "The shell fits you very close. Still, you told me you had made a second friend, and that implies a good deal, I think. That is why I am going to ask you a question. What brought you out from the old country? I want to know more than my father does."

She looked him steadily in the eyes, and though Appleby was never quite sure why he did so he told her. Once or twice she asked an apposite question, and there was something in her close attention and unexpressed sympathy that wiled from him more than he had ever meant to communicate to any one, for Nettie Harding knew her influence and could direct it well. She sat thoughtfully silent for at least a minute when he had finished, and then once more looked at him.

"I don't know if you expect appreciation — but I think you were very foolish," she said.

"No," said Appleby slowly. "Not in this case. You see, he was very fond of her."

Again the little gleam showed in the girl's eyes, but she shook her head. "I have paid you too many indirect compliments, though you naturally did not notice them, to waste any more on you, and I am going to talk straight," she said. "The *Deus ex machina* is quite too big a part for you. To put it differently — why did you meddle with affairs altogether beyond your comprehension?"

"I think I told you she was very fond of him."

"You did n't," said Nettie. "Still, we are getting considerably nearer the truth now. Do you know you hit off that girl's character with an insight I never suspected you had in you? You made me understand her. And you had seen her for just fourteen days."

"One can come to a conclusion about a man or woman in even a shorter time."

"Of course! In a good deal less. In one fateful moment — some folks believe!"

Appleby saw the little mocking smile fade from the girl's

THE ALCALDE'S BALL

lips, and something he could not quite fathom in her eyes, though it in a fashion suggested comprehension and sympathy. If he was right, Miss Harding's penetration appeared astonishing. He would not, however, betray himself, and his voice was even when he said, "You have not shown me yet where I was mistaken."

"In trying to bring folks together who were best apart; and when you thought she was fond of him you were wrong."

"No," said Appleby doggedly.

Nettie laughed in a curious fashion. "She does not know your friend as you do, for you gave him away by the excuses you made for him. The girl you have pictured to me could never be fond of that kind of man. She is in love with the man she thinks he is. You can appreciate the difference, but she will find him out sooner or later."

Appleby started. "No," he said. "I think he will tell her, and she will forgive him; though he did nothing very wrong."

"That man will never tell her — or speak a word to clear you. Still, I think you can do without friends of that kind. You have good ones in this country."

Appleby was glad that he was relieved of the necessity of answering, because the banker's wife waddled out, clad in black from heel to crown — for she wore a lace mantilla there — with powdered face, into the veranda; and since the camaraderie that existed between him and the girl was not likely to be understood or appreciated by a lady of Castilian extraction he went away. He also wanted to think, and descending to a nook of the patio where there was a seat lighted a cigar.

If Miss Harding was right, and he had seen already that she was a young woman of singular penetration, he had made his sacrifice — which had, however, not cost him very much — in vain; but what disconcerted him was the fact that she had forced the truth he had strenuously striven to close his eyes to upon him. Still, even that, he told himself, did not count for very much just then. Even if she did not love Tony, Violet Wayne was patrician to her finger tips and he an outcast adventurer. That was a very convincing reason why he should think no more of her, and yet even then her face rose up before his fancy and would not be driven away. It was

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

almost a relief when he heard a step behind him, and turning sharply saw a little olive-faced officer in tight green uniform smiling at him.

" You do not find the women of this country sympathetic — though you dance our dances well? " he said.

Appleby was on his guard, and regretted he had figured in the many-stepped dances he had been taught at Algeciras at all, for he had hitherto deemed it wise to evince no close acquaintance with Castilian customs ; and Espada Morales had very keen eyes.

" That is a little astonishing, unless it is the national courtesy which prompts you to tell me so," he said.

Morales shrugged his shoulders. " The nice articulation of our 'jota' and 'zeta,' which are embarrassing to strangers, is even more astonishing. One does not overcome that difficulty in the two months you have spent in this country. Still, what is that to me? It is not my business to inquire where my friends acquired Castilian."

Appleby wondered whether this was meant as a hint that the prosecution of such an inquiry might not be desirable to him. He had seen the Colonel Morales twice in battle, and while he had little fear of recognition in his present guise had been told a good deal which by no means pleased him about the man. Morales had, it was believed, the scent of a sleuth-hound and the jaguar's voracity.

" It is at least an honor to be counted among a distinguished soldier's friends," he said.

Morales made a little gesture of deprecation. " Soldiering is an ill-paid trade, and you others are to be envied," he said. " This is why I appeal to you as the Señor Harding's superintendent and a well-wisher of Spain. Mine is a poor country, and our troops are short of clothing and necessaries. The loyalists of this district have responded to the appeal we made them generously, and it seemed only fitting to give you an opportunity."

Appleby knew that the troops were wretchedly supplied with commissariat and drugs, and the affair was within the discretion Harding allowed him. Still, he decided to make an experiment.

" If a hundred dollars would be of any service they will be paid to the treasurer of the fund," he said.

THE ALCALDE'S BALL

Morales fixed his dark eyes upon him for a moment, and gratitude was not exactly what he read in them. Appleby, however, met them steadily, and the officer smiled.

"Two hundred would be more useful, but we come begging and not making a demand," he said. "The treasurer is, however, at Havana, and it would be a convenience if you gave the silver to me."

"Well," said Appleby, "I will give you one hundred dollars."

Morales expressed his thanks, but he did not go away. Indeed, Appleby felt that he was watching him covertly as he took out a cigar.

"There is another affair in which you could be of service to me," he said. "We have all our little shortcomings, and I have been unfortunate at the Casino. What would you? One has to ingratiate himself with these Cubans, and I have lost a good deal of money. Holding command as I do, I cannot ask one of them for a loan."

"Would that be a great disadvantage?" said Appleby.

Morales smiled again, not altogether pleasantly. "They might lend under fear of reprisal, which would be distasteful to me. Men's tongues, my friend, are very censorious in this country; but one could confide in your discretion, and I should be grateful if you could show me how to negotiate a small loan until the Administration remembers that our pay is due."

Appleby sat silent a space, for he appreciated the delicacy of the officer's hint. Morales had, however, made his horse-leech nature tolerably plain already, and Appleby decided to stand firm.

"I will mention it to Mr. Harding when he comes back," he said.

"To wait would be especially inconvenient to me."

"Still, that is the most I can do," said Appleby.

Morales shrugged his shoulders, discoursed about the dancing, and then moved away; but Appleby realized that his firmness would probably cost him something. He knew that Morales would for several reasons be chary of any attempt to hamper the prosperity of the San Cristoval hacienda, but he felt that its manager might be made to feel his resentment individually. Still, he was in Harding's service, and that fact carried an obligation with it.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

Some time had now passed since he had left the dancers, and deciding that it would be advisable to make another appearance among them he had risen to his feet, when there was a trampling under the archway that led into the patio, and three men came into the light. Two of them carried rifles and wore the cazadores' uniform, but the third was hatless and ragged, and walked with difficulty, with a strip of hide between his ankles and his hands lashed behind him. Appleby started a little when he saw him. The man's face was drawn and haggard, but he was one who had fought well with the Sin Verguenza.

It also became evident that he saw Appleby and recognized him, for he looked straight at him with an appeal in his eyes, and then, turning his head away, plodded apathetically into the patio between his captors. That alone would probably have decided Appleby. The man had asked for help, but he had also made it plain that he had no intention of betraying a comrade; and Appleby knew that while the Castilian has his shortcomings, they are very seldom evident when he meets his end.

The cazadores led the man towards one of the basement rooms, which served now and then as a place of detention when the Alcalde desired to question suspected persons, and thrust him in. Then one came out grumbling, and stopped his companion as with a gesture he crossed the patio.

"There is no key, and one of us must stay here," he said. "Now, if I could have found the little Tomasa we should have had a flask of wine. There is plenty here to-night."

The other man glanced up at the lighted windows, and Appleby, who slipped back out of sight into the shadow, saw that he was white with dust, and surmised that he was correspondingly thirsty.

"There will be no chance of that when we have told the Alcalde," he said. "It is a misfortune. The wine would have been welcome."

They looked at each other, and then back at the closed door. "That man can scarcely hobble, and his hands are tied," said one. "Go back and rattle at the lock, and he will think it is the key. Then if you are quick you may find Tomasa while I tell the Alcalde."

The soldier went back and did something to the lock with

THE ALCALDE'S BALL

his bayonet, and then made a sign to his comrade, who went up the stairway. Then he disappeared through a door which apparently led to the kitchen, and Appleby, treading softly, slipped forward through the shadows. There was nobody in the patio now, and the streets were silent, while it only took him a moment or two to reach the door. In another he had slashed the man's bonds through, and a ragged object glided silently across the patio. Appleby stood still a few seconds with beating heart until the swiftly moving shadow vanished through the arch, and then went up the stairway in haste, but as softly as he could. He, however, stopped suddenly when he reached the veranda, for Nettie Harding was leaning over the balustrade, and the banker's wife sitting in a cane chair behind her. She saw the question in his eyes and nodded.

"Yes," she said, "I saw you. The Señora Frequilla saw nothing. She is half asleep. Why did you do it?"

"He would have been shot to-morrow," said Appleby.

The girl laid her hand upon his arm, and led him into the lighted room, where, as it happened, a dance was just commencing. They took their places among the rest, and nothing unusual happened for several minutes. Then there was a shout from the patio and a tramp of feet, and the dancing ceased. Asking vague questions, the guests streamed down the stairway, and when Appleby and Nettie Harding, who followed, stopped among the rest at a turning Morales was standing in the patio very grim in face beside the Alcalde, with two dusty and evidently very apprehensive cazadores before him.

"To the cuartel, and tell the Sergeant Antonio to turn out ten men at once. I will consider your reward to-morrow," he said, and turned to the Alcalde. "It would be well, señor, if you sent word to the civiles."

Then he smiled at the guests, who made room for him as he approached the stairway and stopped close by Appleby, who felt the girl's hand tremble a little on his arm.

"I am sorry that you should be disturbed by this affair," he said; and Appleby wondered whether it was altogether by chance that the officer's glance was turned in his direction. "Two of my men have allowed an Insurgent to escape them, for which they will be rewarded. It is, however, evident that

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

he had a friend who cut his bonds, and when we find him that man will also be duly compensated."

The little vindictive flash in the dark eyes was very significant, and one or two of the guests, Loyalists as they were, moved rather further out of Morales' way than was necessary as he went back up the stairway.

XII

PANCHO'S WARNING

A WEEK had passed since the Alcalde's ball, when Appleby awakened late one night from a restless sleep at the hacienda San Cristoval. He had shut the lattices of his window because the moonlight streamed in, and it is not advisable for white men to sleep under that pale radiance in the tropics; and the room was almost insufferably hot, which Appleby surmised was the cause of his awakening. He was, however, anxious to get to sleep again, for his post was no sinecure, and he usually rose in the early morning.

Cuba was in a very unsettled state just then, steeped in intrigue and overrun with spies, while among Loyalists and Insurgents alike faction plotted against faction. Both were divided by internecine jealousies, and the mixed population of native-born Cubans of Iberian blood, Spaniards from the Peninsular and the Canaries, Chinamen, negroes, and mulattoes, appeared incapable of cohesion. Stability of purpose is not a prominent characteristic of the Latins, and while the country drifted in discord towards anarchy, a similar state of affairs existed on a smaller scale at the hacienda San Cristoval. The men who by the favor of the military rulers were allowed to take Harding's pay apparently disdained continuous effort, and desisted from it to discuss politics on every opportunity; while knives were not infrequently drawn in defence of their somewhat variable convictions.

It was with annoyance he found he could not sleep, and resigned himself to pass the weary hours waiting for daylight as he had frequently done before. The perspiration dripped from him, and there was a pain in his joints, for the insidious malarial fever he had contracted in the swamps troubled him now and then, and finding no relief in any change of posture he lay rigidly still. A mosquito hovered about him with a

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

thin, persistent droning — and one mosquito is occasionally sufficient to drive a sleepless man to frenzy — but the building was very silent. Appleby could see the faint gleam of moonlight deflected by the lattice on the floor, but the rest of the room was wrapped in inky blackness. He was glad of that, for there was a dull ache at the back of his eyes, which he surmised was the result of standing for most of twelve hours in the glare of the whitewashed sheds the previous day. By and by, however, the dead stillness which the droning of the mosquito emphasized grew oppressive, and he found himself listening with a curious intentness for any sound that would break it. He did not know why he did so, but he obeyed the impulse with a vague feeling that watchfulness was advisable.

Five minutes passed, as it were, interminably, while he only heard the strident ticking of the watch beneath his pillow, and then the stairway leading to the veranda outside his window creaked softly. That was nothing unusual, for the timber not infrequently groaned and cracked under the change of temperature in the stillness of the night; but there was something that stirred Appleby's suspicions in the sound, and he raised himself softly when he heard it again. The room he slept in opened into a larger one, which Harding had fitted up as an office, where the safe was kept, but the door between it and the veranda was barred, and Appleby had himself made fast the lattice of the window.

He could hear nothing further for a space, and was annoyed to feel the hand he laid on the pillow trembling and his hair wet with perspiration. Then it was with difficulty he checked a gasp, for the door handle seemed to rattle, and the bolt of the lock slid home with a soft click. The smooth sound was very suggestive, for Appleby had found the lock stiff and hard to move. Somebody had apparently oiled it surreptitiously, and it was evident that he would not have done so without a purpose. For a moment he was almost dismayed. He was shut in, and there were a good many pesetas in Harding's safe; but the unpleasant nervous strain he had hitherto been sensible of had gone and left him with faculties sharpened by anger. Then an inspiration dawned on him, and his lips set in a little grim smile. The Latin has usually no great regard for trifles, and it was not very astonishing that the man who oiled

PANCHO'S WARNING

and locked the door had overlooked the fact that the lattice was fastened within.

Appleby was out of bed in a moment, and moving with silent deliberation, slipped a duck jacket over his pajamas and softly pulled out a bureau drawer. Here, however, he had another astonishment, for the pistol he kept under his clothing had gone, and he stood still a moment reflecting with the collectedness which usually characterized him in an emergency. Harper slept in a distant wing of the building; the major-domo, or house steward, in a room by the kitchen across the patio; and he could not waken either without giving a general alarm, which did not appear advisable. Appleby had no great confidence in any of his retainers, and considered it likely that some of them were in the plot, and would in all probability contrive the escape of the prowler in the confusion. He must, it seemed, see the affair through alone, and, what was more to the purpose, unarmed. Then he remembered the bar which, when dropped into two sockets, locked the two halves of the lattice, and treading softly made for the window. It was quite certain now that somebody was moving about the adjoining room.

The lattice swung open with scarcely a sound, and if Appleby made any noise crawling through the opening the intruder apparently did not hear him. In another few moments he had gained the adjoining door which stood just ajar, and dimly saw the black figure of a man who held a small lantern bending over the American office bureau. This astonished Appleby, who had expected the iron safe beside it would have claimed his attention.

He pushed the door a little farther open, and stood close against it with his fingers tightening on the bar, while the man whose face he could not see flung several bundles of documents out of a drawer, and held them near the lantern, as though he would read the endorsements upon them, which Appleby remembered were in English. He had, however, apparently no difficulty in understanding them, for he took up each bundle and glanced at it before he laid it down, and then, pulling the drawer out, thrust his hand into the opening.

Appleby started as he watched him, for that drawer was shorter than the rest, and there was a hidden receptacle behind it. It was difficult for any one to remain impartially neutral

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

in Cuba just then, and Appleby had surmised already that Harding only retained his footing there by the exercise of skilful diplomacy, while communications reached him now and then which he showed to nobody. He had, however, taken the contents of the receptacle away with him.

It was a very slight movement that Appleby made, but the door he leaned against creaked, and the man swung sharply round. Perhaps he was afraid of the light of the lantern being seen from the windows opposite, for he did not raise it, but stood still, apparently glancing about him, while Appleby waited motionless with every nerve in his body tingling. It seemed to him that there was a faint sound behind him on the stairway.

He fancied the almost intolerable tension lasted for nearly a minute, and then the man, who failed to see him, turned again with a little half-audible ejaculation, and opening another drawer bent over it with his back to Appleby, who moved silently in his direction. He made two strides and stopped, with his fingers quivering on the bar; but the man was still stooping over the drawer, and he made another stride and stopped again. He could almost reach the stranger with the bar, but remembering the Cuban's quickness with the steel he decided it would be advisable to make quite certain.

A board creaked as he made the next step, the man swung round again, and there was a pale flash in the light of the lantern as he sprang backwards. He was on the opposite side of the bureau and out of reach when Appleby swung up the bar, but the latter, who recognized the fact, stood between him and the door. They stood still for what seemed an interminable space in the black darkness, for the faint blink of light from the lantern was cut off by the displaced drawer, and then Appleby moved a foot or two as the dim shadowy figure, which he fancied had drawn itself together, sidled round the bureau. He surmised that his adversary was bracing himself for a spring, and knew that unless he met it with the bar he would be at the mercy of the steel. Still, he meant at any cost to hold the position that commanded the door.

The two stopped again, a trifle nearer each other, and Appleby felt his right arm tingle. Still, a rash move would probably prove fatal, and he remembered even then that because silent endurance is not a characteristic of the Latins his

PANCHO'S WARNING

adversary was the more likely to yield beneath the strain and do something that would equalize the advantage his skill with the knife conferred upon him. The man with colder blood could wait. He, however, found it sufficiently harassing, for in the meanwhile he could feel in fancy the sting of the knife, and remembered with unpleasant distinctness the feinting play with the steel he had now and then seen his peons indulge in. One thrust, he fancied, would suffice, for the Cuban knows just how and where to strike. He could feel his heart beating, and the perspiration streaming down his face.

Then the door behind him was flung wide open, a blink of light flashed into the room and shone upon an olive-tinted face; while, when Appleby, uncertain what this boded, swung up the bar to force an issue, the man flung down a knife.

"Carramba!" he said hoarsely. "It is too unequal."

Appleby glanced over his shoulder, and saw Pancho, his major-domo, standing half dressed not far behind him with a lantern and a big machete in his hand. He stooped, picked up the knife, and with a flick of his fingers slid it into his sleeve. Then he held the lantern higher, and Appleby recognized his adversary as a weight clerk in the sugar mill. He blinked with his eyes, and the damp dripped from his face, which showed haggard and drawn; but Appleby, who wondered if his own wore that look, surmised that this was not due to cowardice, and understood why the man breathed in gasps.

"Leave the light, and go for the Señor Harper, Pancho," he said, and his voice sounded curiously harsh and uneven.

The major-domo, however, shook his head. "With permission, I will stay here, señor," he said. "Ask him what he has come for."

The other man sat down somewhat limply on the table and essayed to laugh. "The question is not necessary, Don Pancho," he said. "One has always a use for silver."

Appleby glanced at the safe, which had not been tampered with, and fancied as he did so that Pancho made a sign to him.

"You were looking for it in a curious place," he said. "One does not keep silver loose in a drawer. At least, not in Cuba. It would be better if you told us plainly what brought you here."

"To what purpose, when you do not believe me?" said

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

the man, with an attempt at tranquillity. "Still, the *Señor* Harding is only liberal to his countrymen; and I have been unfortunate at the Casino."

Appleby saw the major-domo's smile of incredulity, and felt a mild astonishment at the fact that he was quietly arguing with a man who would, he knew, have killed him without compunction a few minutes earlier had the opportunity been afforded him.

"Well," he said a trifle impatiently, "you can explain it to the *Alcalde*. Will you go for the *Señor* Harper, and unlock the cellar next the stables as you come back, Pancho? He would be safe there until to-morrow."

The major-domo shook his head. "It would be better if you let him go," he said. "The law is troublesome and expensive in this country."

Appleby, who was already aware of this, reflected. He knew the insecurity of his own position, and Harding had warned him especially to keep clear of any complications with the officials; while he had confidence in Pancho and recognized the significance of his tone. Still, he was unwilling to let their captive go scot-free and gazed at him steadily.

The man, who met his gaze, smiled a little. "It is good advice Don Pancho has given you. I tell you so with all sincerity."

"Well," said Appleby, "you can go, but you will not get off so easily if you ever come back again. Still, I want the pistol you stole from me."

The man raised his shoulders. "It is an unpleasant word, *señor*, and you will find the pistol in the drawer beneath the one where you usually keep it. It is too noisy a weapon to be much esteemed in Cuba. Still, to requite a courtesy, you will take a hint from me. When a man is in charge of a good many pesetas it is not wise of him to keep his pistol in a drawer."

He slipped down from the table, asked Pancho for his knife, and took off his hat with grave politeness when it was handed him. Then he went down the stairway, and sitting down at the foot of it apparently put his shoes on before he strode away along the tram-line. Appleby laid his hand on the major-domo's shoulder.

PANCHO'S WARNING

"You came opportunely, comrade," he said. "I am grateful."

It was not by accident he employed the Castilian word which implies a kindly regard as well as familiarity, and the man seemed to recognize it, for he smiled curiously.

"It is nothing, señor," he said. "I did not sleep well, and saw the man creep into the veranda from my bed, which is near the window. In not sending him to the Alcalde you were wise."

"I am not sure that I was," said Appleby.

Pancho made a little gesture. "It is a turbulent country, and the man who escapes trouble is the one who lives the most quietly."

He turned away, as though to avoid further questions, while Appleby went back to bed, and, contrary to his expectations, slept until the morning.

It was some days later when he rode over to Santa Marta and, leaving the mule at the "Four Nations," called at the banker's house, where he found Nettie Harding sitting with her host and hostess on the flat roof. It was, though still early in the evening, dark, and the after-dinner coffee, the choicest product of Costa Rica, was set out in very little cups on the table before them; while the banker, who was stout and elderly, lay drowsily in a big chair. His wife had also little to say, and Appleby drew his chair up to Nettie Harding's side. The lamp on the table burned without a flicker in the still air, and a cloudless vault of indigo stretched above the sun-scorched town. Beyond the rows of roofs a band was playing in the plaza, and a hum of voices rose from the shadowy streets beneath. It was a little cooler now, and a pleasant scent of heliotrope came up from the patio.

Nettie Harding raised her head as though to listen to the music, and then glanced at the stars above. "All this," she said, "is distinctly Cuban, is n't it?"

Appleby nodded. "It's Spanish, which is the same thing. They're a consistent people," he said. "Still, I'm not sure that I quite catch your meaning."

Nettie laughed, and turned so that the lamplight touched her face. "Oh, I talk quite casually now and then. I meant that being Cuban it could n't be English."

"That is apparent."

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"Well, I was wondering if, bearing in mind the difference, you were content with it."

Appleby laughed. "I am, you will also remember, an adventurer, and the country that feeds me is, as they say in yours, quite good enough for me. A little to eat, a little sunshine, a comrade's smile, and enough kindly earth to cover one at the last, is all, I believe, that one is entitled to expect."

He had meant to answer lightly, but a curious little inflection crept into his voice against his will, and he sat still a moment while the memories crowded upon him, with a longing that would not be shaken off. Once more he seemed to be gazing down on the red beech woods and palely flashing river from the terrace at Northrop Hall, though he recognized that in the meanwhile Nettie Harding was watching him with a gleam of sympathetic comprehension in her eyes. It was significant that he did not feel impelled to speak, for they had arrived at a degree of intimacy which made silence admissible, and still were comrades, and nothing more.

"If you had said that with a purpose I would n't have been in the least sorry for you," she said. "It would have been cheap, but that's just why I know you did n't. Still, are you quite sure there is nothing you long for over there? I mean, of course, in England."

Appleby was on the roof in Santa Marta in body, and noticed that Miss Harding made a very effective picture in her long white dress as she glanced at him with the little smile, but he was at the same time dually sensible of the crimson flush on the English beech woods and the meadows streaked with wisps of mist, while once more the alluring vision he had fought against glided into the scene. It was a girl with gray eyes and ruddy hair, graver, deeper of thought and emotion, and more imperious than Nettie Harding.

"Nothing that I am ever likely to get," he said.

Nettie laughed, but there was a faint ring in her voice, and long afterwards Appleby remembered her words, which then appeared prophetic.

"Well," she said, "do you know that if I could I would get it you, and there is very little an American girl can't get when she sets her heart on it? Now that sounds bombastic, but I'm not sure that it is. Anyway, I'm going to England presently."

PANCHO'S WARNING

Appleby looked up sharply. "To England!"

"Yes; you heard me. You will be sorry, but, of course, I'm coming back again."

"I know I can tell you that I certainly shall without its appearing presumption," said Appleby.

The girl nodded. "We have n't any use for that word in our country. In fact, we have rather a liking for a presumptuous man so long as he is sensible," she said. "Then there is nothing I can do for you there?"

"No," said Appleby.

Nettie leaned a little nearer him, and though she smiled a faint flush crept into her cheek. "If there were, you would tell me? I can't help remembering what you did for me."

"I think I would. Still, you see there is nothing."

"Well, I'm not quite sure, and one never knows whom he may meet in England. It's quite a small place, anyway."

Then there was a ringing of steel on stone, and she looked round with a little impatient gesture as she said, "Here is that odious Morales again!"

The banker rose, and brought a chair as the colonel came forward, but the little pressure of the girl's hand on his arm warned Appleby that she desired him to remain, and for an hour they discussed the campaign. Then Appleby decided to relate what had happened at the hacienda a few nights earlier, though he said very little about the papers and nothing concerning the hidden receptacle. Morales, he fancied, listened with eagerness, and once his dark eyes flashed.

"You were wrong when you let him go," he said. "If it happens again I should suggest the pistol. One gains nothing by showing those gentlemen toleration."

Then he shrugged his shoulders, and turned to the banker's wife with a smile; but Appleby had noticed the vindictiveness in his tone, and as he surmised it was not accounted for by the fact that the man had broken into Harding's office, wondered whether it was because he had failed to accomplish his purpose. He, however, felt that Nettie Harding desired him to outstay the colonel, and was content with the little grateful glance she cast at him when Morales went away. Ten minutes later Appleby also rose, but the banker detained him a minute or two.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"You have a consignment of sugar to be shipped," he said.
"Some one will go down to the port. Yourself, I think?"
"Yes," said Appleby.

"Then it would be a kindness if you would hand this letter to the captain to post in America," he said. "It is of some importance to the Señor Harding and others."

"With pleasure, but why not post it here?"

The banker laid his hand on Appleby's shoulder, and shook his head significantly. "One does not trust anything of importance to the post just now," he said. "This is an affair in which the greatest discretion is necessary. When one puts anything he does not wish the administration to know in a letter he burns the blotting paper."

Appleby was not altogether astonished, but he took the packet the banker handed him; and when they shook hands the latter once more glanced at him warningly.

"The discretion!" he said. "You will remember — the discretion."

XIII

THE SECOND ATTEMPT

IT was at a brisk walk Appleby left the banker's house, but he stopped a few minutes later where several streets branched off from a little plaza. He had some trifling business with a tobacco merchant who lived in one of them, but he decided after a moment's reflection that it was scarcely likely he would find the man, who probably spent the evenings at a café, at home just then. Appleby had, however, stopped somewhat suddenly, and noticed that the footsteps he had heard behind him also ceased a second or two later. This, he surmised, had in all probability no special significance; but he raised his hand to an inner pocket where the letter the banker had given him lay. It was evidently of some importance, and he remembered that it was not money the man he had surprised at the hacienda was in search of.

As it happened he carried another letter, which he meant to ask somebody at the "Four Nations" to post. It was of very little consequence, and contained only a list of Amercian tools and machinery which Harding dealt in, and Appleby smiled as he slipped it into the lower pocket of his jacket. Then he took out his cigar-case and slowly lighted a cigar, so that anybody who might be watching him should find a motive for his delay. He looked about him cautiously as he did so.

The plaza was small and dark, though a thin crescent moon was just rising over the clustering roofs. Its faint light silvered the higher portions of the two square church towers that rose blackly against the velvety indigo with one great star between them, but the rest of the building, which was the one Nettie Harding had found shelter in, was blurred and shadowy. Beyond it a few lights blinked in the calle he had just passed through, but they only intensified the darkness of the narrow gap between the flat-roofed houses, and — for it

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

was getting late — the street seemed utterly silent. Yet Appleby had certainly heard footsteps, and no closing of a door to account for their cessation. The houses were large in that vicinity, and built, for the most part, round a patio, the outer door of which not infrequently consisted of a heavy iron grille which could scarcely be closed noiselessly. In front of him two streets branched off, one broad and well paved, the other narrow and very dark. The latter, however, led straight to the "Four Nations," past the carniceria, or butchery, and two or three of the little wine-shops of shady repute which are usually to be found close to the principal church in a Spanish town. Here and there a blink of light streamed out from the open lattice of one of them.

Appleby stood still a moment, and then, reflecting that anybody who might be following him would expect him to take the broader way, slipped into the narrow street. A day or two earlier he would have laughed at the notion, but the footsteps which had stopped so abruptly troubled him. He had passed one wine-shop when he heard them again, and, though it seemed at least possible that they were those of some citizen going home, there was an unpleasant suggestiveness in them, and when the light of the second wine-shop fell across the street he decided to enter it. If the man behind him also stopped, his motive would be apparent.

Two or three men sat in the wine-shop with little glasses of caña before them, and Appleby was reassured when he glanced at them. They were evidently of the humbler orders, men who earned a meagre two or three pesetas a day; but their garments of cotton and coarse unstarched linen were, as usual, spotlessly clean, and he surmised from their shade of complexion that they had emigrated to Cuba from the Canaries. They saluted him courteously when he took off his hat on entering, and one laid down the torn and wine-stained journal he was reading.

"The war is making sugar dearer, señor," he said.

Appleby was not altogether pleased at being recognized, as the observation implied, but the man seemed civil, and he smiled.

"It also puts up the cost of making it," he said, turning to the landlord, as an excuse for remaining a little occurred to him. "You have Vermouth in an open bottle?"

THE SECOND ATTEMPT

"No, señor," said the other, as Appleby had expected. "Since the war makes pesetas scarce one drinks the thin red wine and caña here. Still, I have a few bottles with the seal on."

Appleby laughed. "Well," he said, "as it has been observed, sugar is dear, and Vermouth is a wine I have a liking for. It is conceivable that these gentlemen would taste it with me."

The men appeared quite willing, and one of them brought out a handful of coarse maize-husk cigarettes when the host laid down the bottle with the white Savoy cross upon it and a few little glasses.

"It is not the tobacco the señor usually smokes, but his cigar has gone out, and one offers what he has with the good will," he said.

The man was clearly a peon, a day laborer, but Appleby fancied his manner could not have been improved upon, for it was free alike from undue deference or any assertion of equality. He took one of the cigarettes, and when he had handed round the little glasses sat with his face towards the door. The light from it, as he was pleased to notice, fell right across the narrow street, and he sat with his back to it. He had also not long to wait, for a patter of footsteps flung back by the white walls grew louder, and Appleby noticed that while they had rung sharp and decided they appeared to slacken as the man approached the wine-shop. This appeared significant, since it suggested that the man did not wish to cross the stream of light.

It was, however, evident that he must either stop or pass through it, and in another moment Appleby saw him. There was nothing especially noticeable about him except that the broad felt hat was pulled down a trifle lower than seemed necessary, and Appleby wondered if his suspicions were causeless, until the man turned his head a trifle. The movement was almost imperceptible, but Appleby felt that the dark eyes had rested on him a moment. Then as the stranger passed on he saw one of the men in the wine-shop glance at his companion, who made a little gesture of comprehension. It was, however, a few moments later, and there was once more silence in the shadowy street when he turned to Appleby.

"It is getting late, señor," he said significantly. "You sleep at the 'Four Nations'?"

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"No," said Appleby, who wondered if this was intended as a hint. "Still, I am going there."

The peon, he fancied, glanced at the landlord. "Then it would perhaps be better to go round by the calle Obispo."

Appleby reflected a moment, for he fancied there was a meaning in this, but he knew the calle Obispo would be almost deserted at that hour; while by going through the carniceria he would shorten the distance, and, at least, have the man he suspected in front of him.

"I think I will go straight on," he said.

"Then you will find it convenient to walk in the middle of the road," said the peon.

Appleby glanced sharply at the man. He had seen sufficient of Spanish towns to know that there were reasons quite unconnected with the safety of foot passengers or their property which warranted the warning; but the olive face was expressionless, and with a punctilious salutation he left the wine-shop. Glancing over his shoulder a moment or two later, he saw the men silhouetted black against the light as they stood in the doorway, and swung into faster stride. He felt he had nothing to fear from them, but their hints had been unpleasantly suggestive.

In two or three minutes he reached the dark slaughter-houses, which were faced by a wall with one or two unlighted windows high up in it, and as, treading softly, he strained his ears he once more caught a faint patter behind him. This was somewhat astonishing, as it was evident that if the man who passed the wine-shop still desired to keep him in view he must have made a considerable round. Appleby stopped suddenly, and made up his mind when the footsteps ceased too. The spot was lonely, and shut in by the slaughter-houses and high blank walls; while the feeling that somebody was creeping up behind him through the darkness was singularly unpleasant, so much so, in fact, that it changed the concern he was sensible of into anger. He had also distinct objections to being stabbed in the back, and decided that if an affray was inevitable he would, at least, force the assailant's hand, and to do that cover of some kind was necessary. Sooner or later he would find a doorway he could slip into, and he went on again softly and hastily.

He had made another fifty yards, and the footsteps were

THE SECOND ATTEMPT

plainer still behind, when a pillar partly bedded in it broke the bare line of wall, and pulling out the little pistol from his hip pocket he turned sharply and flung himself into the gloom behind it. Then he realized his blunder, and that he had two men to deal with instead of one, for a strip of heavy fabric was flung about his head, and hard fingers fastened on his throat. Appleby gasped, and drew the trigger convulsively, while there was a crash as the pistol exploded. Then he felt it slip from his fingers, for the strength seemed to go out of him, and he was only sensible that he was fighting hard for breath. How long the tense effort lasted he did not know, but his faculties had almost deserted him when a cry he could scarcely hear rose from the street, and was followed by a sound of running feet.

Then he was flung against the pillar, and there was a crash as a shadowy object leapt into the doorway. A man reeled out of it in a blundering fashion, another sped down the street, and Appleby, staggering out, leaned, gasping, against the wall. It was some moments before he could make anything out, and then he saw two men standing close in front of him. One held something in his hand, and by their voices he fancied they were the peons he had met in the wine-shop. Looking round him as his scattered senses came slowly back, he saw another man apparently crawling out of the gutter. Then there was a rapid tramp of feet further up the street, and one of the men seemed to look at his companion, who made a sign of agreement.

“The civiles!” he said.

Then they fell upon the man in the gutter, dragged him to his feet, drove him before them with kicks, and stood still again while he reeled away in an unsteady fashion which suggested that he was at least half dazed. In the meanwhile the rapid tramp behind them had been growing louder, and the shuffling steps had scarcely ceased when a light was flashed into Appleby’s face, and he saw a man with a lantern in trim white uniform standing a few paces away, and another who carried a pistol behind him. Then the light was turned aside, and revealed the two peons from the wine-shop waiting quietly to be questioned.

Appleby recognized the men in uniform as civil guards, and knew that almost every man in that body had won distinction in the military service.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

The street was now very silent again, and it was evident that the peons did not consider it advisable to put the civiles on the track of the fugitive just yet. The one who held the lantern looked at them, standing erect, with knee bent a trifle, and a big pistol projecting from the holster at his belt.

"There was a shot, and by and by a shout," he said. "An explanation is desired. You are warned to be precise."

"It is simple," said one of the peons. "Comes this señor, the Amercian, into the wine-shop of Cananos where we are sitting. There he takes a glass of Vermouth and goes away. Then comes a man slipping by where it is darkest, and we go to warn the señor taking the caña bottle. It appears there is another man waiting in this doorway, there is a struggle, and Vincente strikes down one of the prowlers with the bottle. He gets to his feet again, and they go in haste when they hear you coming. Then we find the señor faint and short of breath."

The civile stretched out his hand for the caña bottle, which was apparently corked, and balanced it. "It would serve — a man might be killed with it," he said. "But you had a knife!"

"With excuses," said the peon. "We respect the law. The knife is forbidden."

There was a little grim twinkle in the civile's eyes, but he fixed them on Appleby. "I will not ask you to shake your sleeve, or question your comrade, because his tale would be the same," he said. "That is what happened, señor?"

"Yes," said Appleby, "so far as I can remember. I was going from the banker's to the 'Four Nations' when I became aware that there was a man following me. To avoid him I slipped into this doorway, where another man was waiting. It was my pistol you heard, but the other man, whom I had not expected, had his fingers on my throat, and I was helpless when these others appeared."

The civile made a little gesture of comprehension, and then, tilting up his chin, laid his fingers on his throat. "The head drawn back — and the thumb so! With the knee in the back at the same time it was as sure as the knife. The señor is to be felicitated on his escape. But the motive? Even in Santa Marta men do not fall upon a stranger without a purpose."

Appleby, who was on his guard at once, felt his pockets, and

THE SECOND ATTEMPT

was sensible of a vast relief when he found the letter the banker had given him was still in his possession. The other in his outer pocket had, however, as he expected, disappeared.

"I think their purpose was evident. It is for money one usually goes to a banker's," he said. "It is also known that I have dealings with the Señor Suarez. Still, thanks to the promptness of the gentlemen here, nothing of importance has been taken from me."

The civile with the lantern glanced at his comrade, who nodded.

"It would be wiser to go there in the daylight another time," said the latter as he held out Appleby's pistol, which he had unobtrusively looked for and picked up. "One cartridge burned — it confirms the story! You would not recognize the men who attacked you?"

"No," said Appleby, and the peon whom the civile turned to shook his head emphatically.

"It was very dark," he said.

The civiles asked a few more questions, and then one of them insisted on escorting Appleby, who apparently failed to make the peons understand that he desired a word with them, to the "Four Nations." The man, however, left him outside the hotel, and Appleby had spent a few minutes there waiting for his mule when one of the peons came quietly up to him in the patio.

"The señor lost this letter not long ago?" he said.

"I did," said Appleby, taking the envelope. "Where did you find it?"

The peon smiled in a curious fashion. "It seems you know our country. I took it from the man Vincente felled, but it did not seem wise to mention it before the civiles. They have sharp eyes, those gentlemen."

"I am indebted," said Appleby. "It is, however, of no importance."

The peon smiled again. "And yet you knew you had lost it, and said nothing. Why would one run a risk to seize a letter?"

"I don't know," said Appleby. "Nor am I sure why you and your companion should take so much trouble to guard a stranger. I would not, of course, offend you by suggesting that you did it to repay me for a glass of Vermouth."

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"For the charity then?" said the peon, smiling.

"I do not think so," said Appleby, who looked at him steadily.

The man laughed. "Well," he said reflectively, "there may have been another reason. It is known to a few that Don Bernardino is a friend of liberty."

Appleby was a trifle astonished, but not sufficiently to show it, since he had already had vague suspicions.

"It is," he said, "a thing one does not admit in Santa Marta, but if one might reward a kindness with money I have a few dollars."

"It is not permissible, señor — not from a comrade," and the man straightened himself a trifle. "Still, one might be grateful for a little bottle."

Appleby laughed, though he was not quite at ease, and entering the hotel came back with two bottles of somewhat costly wine, which he thrust upon the man.

"If I can be of service I think you know where I am to be found," he said.

Again the curious little smile showed in the man's face, but he took off his hat and turned away; while ten minutes later Appleby rode out of Santa Marta somewhat troubled in mind. It was tolerably plain to him that Harding's affairs were being watched with interest by the Administration or somebody who desired to gain a hold on him, and that his own connection with the Sin Verguenza was at least suspected by the peons who had befriended him. That being so, it appeared likely that others were aware of it too.

XIV

APPLEBY PROVES OBDURATE

THE hot day was over, and the light failing rapidly when Appleby, who had just finished *comida*, sat by a window of the hacienda San Cristoval with an English newspaper upon his knee. The room behind him, where Harper lay in a cane chair, was already shadowy, but outside the saffron sunset still flamed beyond the cane, and here and there a palm tuft cut against it hard and sharp in ebony tracery. Inside the air was hot, and heavy with the smell of garlic-tainted oil; but a faint cool draught flowed in between the open lattices, and Appleby, who had been busy since sunrise that day, sighed contentedly as he breathed it in. Beneath him the long white sheds still glimmered faintly, and a troop of men were plodding home along the little tram-line that wound through the cane; while in the direction they came from the smoke of the crushing-mill floated, a long, dingy smear, athwart the soft blueness, out of which here and there a pale star was peeping.

Appleby was dressed in spotless duck, with a gray alpaca jacket over it, and the thin garments showed his somewhat spare symmetry as he lay relaxed in mind and body in his chair. He felt the peaceful stillness of the evening after the strain of the day, for Harding had left him in sole charge for some months now, and the handling of the men who worked for him had taxed all his nerve and skill. By good-humored patience and uncompromising grimness, when that appeared the more advisable, he had convinced his swarthy subordinates that they would gain little by trifling with him, though he had wondered once or twice when an open dispute appeared imminent why it was that certain peons had so stanchly supported him against their discontented comrades. It was not, however, his difficulties with the workmen which caused him most concern, but the task of keeping on good terms with an administration that regarded aliens, and especially Americans,

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

with a jealous eye, and appeasing the rapacity of officials whose exactions would, if unduly yielded to, have absorbed most of Harding's profits. To hit the happy medium was a delicate business, but hitherto Appleby had accomplished it successfully.

The cigar he held had gone out, but he had not noticed it, for the paper on his knee had awakened memories of the life he had left behind him. He could look back upon it without regret, for its trammels had galled him, and the wider scope of the new one appealed to him. In it the qualities of foresight, quick decision, daring, and the power of command were essential, and he had been conscious without vanity that he possessed them. Also, though that counted for less, his salary and bonus on the results of the crushing was liberal.

Still, he was thinking of England, for a paragraph in the paper had seized his attention. There was nothing to show who had sent it him, though two or three had reached him already, and he knew that Nettie Harding was in England. He could scarcely see, but he held up the journal to the fading light, and with difficulty once more deciphered the lines:—

“The electrical manufacturing company have been very busy since the consummation of their agreement with Mr. Anthony Palliser. Already their factory at Dane Cop is in course of construction, and they have an army of workmen laying the new tramway and excavating the dam. It is also rumored that negotiations are in progress for the establishment of subsidiary industries, and it is evident that Northrop will make a stride towards prosperity under the enterprising gentleman who has recently succeeded to the estate.”

Appleby smiled curiously as he laid the paper down. Tony, it was evident, would no longer be hampered by financial embarrassments, and Appleby did not envy him the prosperity he had not hitherto been accustomed to. Still, he wondered vaguely why Tony had never written to the address in Texas, from which letters would have reached him, especially since it appeared that Godfrey Palliser was dead. He was also curious as to whether Tony was married yet, and would have liked to have heard that he was. That, he felt, would have snapped the last tie that bound him to the post, and made it easier to overcome the longing he was sensible of when he remembered Violet Wayne. It would, he fancied, be less

APPLEBY PROVES OBDURATE

difficult if he could think of her as Tony's wife. Then he brushed away the fancies as Harper noisily moved his chair.

"Hallo!" he said. "Another of their blamed officers coming to worry us!"

Appleby heard a beat of hoofs, and looking down saw a man riding along the tramway on a mule. It was too dark to see the stranger clearly, and he sat still until there was a murmur of voices below, and a patter of feet on the stairway.

"He is coming up," he said, with a trace of displeasure in his voice. "I fancied I had made it plain that nobody was to be shown in until I knew his business. Still, we can't turn him out now. Tell Pancho to bring in the lights."

Harper rose, but as he did so the major-domo flung the door open, and stood still with a lamp in his hand as a man walked into the room. He made a little gesture of greeting, and Appleby checked a gasp of astonishment. The major-domo set the lamp on the table, and then slipped out softly, closing the door behind him.

"Don Maccario!" said Harper, staring at the stranger. "Now, I wonder where he got those clothes."

Maccario smiled, and sat down uninvited. He was dressed in broadcloth and very fine linen, and laid a costly Panama hat on the table. Then he held out a little card towards Appleby.

"With permission!" he said. "Don Erminio Peralla, merchant in tobacco, of Havana!"

Harper laughed when he had laid out a bottle and glasses, and the faint rose-like bouquet of Canary moscatel stole into the room.

"That's a prescription you are fond of," he said. "The tobacco business is evidently flourishing."

The last was in Castilian, and Maccario delicately rolled up the brim of the hat and let it spring out again to show the beauty of the fabric, while his dark eyes twinkled.

"It seems that one's efforts for the benefit of his countrymen are appreciated now and then, but my business is the same," he said. "One does not look for the patriot Maccario in the prosperous merchant of tobacco, for those who would make mankind better and freer are usually poor. That is all—but I am still a leader of the Sin Verguenza, and as such I salute you, comrade."

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

He made Appleby a little inclination, which the latter understood, as he drank off his wine. It implied that he, too, was still counted among the Sin Verguenza.

"There is business on hand?" he said quietly, signing to Harper, who moved towards the door.

Maccario, somewhat to his astonishment, checked Harper with a gesture. "It is not necessary," he said. "There is nobody there. Morales is sending his troops away, and by and by we seize the Barremeda district for the Revolution."

"You want me?" asked Appleby very slowly.

A curious little smile crept into Maccario's eyes. "Where could one get another teniente to equal you?"

Appleby sat very still. He had, he fancied, started on the way to prosperity when he became Harding's manager, and while he sympathized vaguely with the aspirations of the few disinterested Insurgents who seemed to possess any he had seen sufficient of the Sin Verguenza. If he could cling to the position it seemed not unlikely that a bright future awaited him; and while free from avarice, he had his ambitions. On the other hand, there were privations relieved only by the brief revelry that followed a scene of rapine, weary marches, hungry bivouacs, and anxious days spent hiding in foul morasses from the troops of Spain. Still, he had already surmised that he would sooner or later have to make the decision, and while he remembered the promise the ragged outcasts had required of him a vague illogical longing for the stress of the conflict awoke in him.

"Well," he said quietly, "when I am wanted I will be ready."

Maccario made him a very slight inclination, which was yet almost stately and expressive, as only a Spaniard's gesture could be.

"It is as one expected, comrade; but perhaps we do not want you to carry the rifle," he said. "It is the silver we have in the meanwhile the most need of."

"What I have is my friends', to the half of my salary."

"We do not take so much from you. A little, yes, when the good will goes with it; but there is more you can do for us."

"No!" and Appleby's voice, though quiet, had a little ring in it. "There is nothing else."

Maccario lifted one hand. "It is arms we want most, my friend, and now the patriotic committee are liberal we are

APPLEBY PROVES OBDURATE

getting them. There remains the question of distribution and storage for the rifles as they some from the coast, which is difficult. Still, I think Morales would not search one place, and that is the hacienda San Cristoval. It is evident how you could help us."

"No," said Appleby grimly. "Not a single rifle shall be hidden here. When the Sin Verguenza send for me I will join them, but in the meanwhile I serve the Señor Harding. That implies a good deal, you understand?"

Maccario appeared reflective. "A little hint sent Morales would, I think, be effectual. Arrives a few files of cazadores with bayonets, and the Señor Harding will want another manager."

"Oh yes," said Harper dryly as he sprang towards the door. "That's quite simple, but the hint is n't sent yet. A word from me, and I guess the Sin Verguenza would be left without a leader!"

Maccario looked round, and laughed softly as he saw the American standing grim in face with his back to the door and a pistol glinting in his hand.

"It is Don Bernardino I have the honor of talking with," he said.

"You have heard all I have to tell you," said Appleby. "I cannot embroil the Señor Harding with Morales."

Maccario rose, and smiled at Harper. "It saves trouble when one has an understanding; and now, my friends, I will show you something. The major-domo had orders not to send up anybody without announcing him, but he admitted me. Will you come out with me into the veranda?"

"Put your pistol up, Harper," said Appleby; but Maccario shook his head.

"Not yet, I think," he said. "Open that lattice so the light shines through. Will you send for the men I mention, Don Bernardino?"

They did as he directed, and when they went out into the veranda Appleby blew a whistle. It was answered by a patter of feet, and Appleby spoke swiftly when a man appeared below.

"I have sent for the men. They are among the best we have, and supported me when I had a difference with the rest," he said.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

Maccario smiled. "They did as they were told, my friend."

Appleby could not see his face because the light from the room was behind them, but his tone was significant, and he waited in some astonishment until the patter of feet commenced again, and half-seen men flitted into the patio. The latter could, however, see the men above them, for a threatening murmur went up when they caught the glint of Harper's pistol, and two of them came running to the foot of the stairway. Maccario laughed, and laid his hand on Harper's shoulder. Then the murmurs died away, and the men stood still below, while Maccario turned with a little nod to Appleby.

"One would fancy they would do what I wished," he said. "The Sin Verguenza have, it seems, friends everywhere. It is permissible for one to change his mind."

"Yes," said Appleby, who hid his astonishment by an effort. "Still, in this case you have not been as wise as usual, Don Maccario. There are men who become more obdurate when you try to intimidate them. You have already heard my decision."

Maccario laughed, and waved his hand to the men below. "I commend these two gentlemen to your respect. They are good friends of mine. There is nothing else," he said. "Now we will go back again, Don Bernardino."

The men apparently went away, and Maccario, who walked back into the room, smiled when he seated himself again.

"The Señor Harding is to be congratulated upon his manager," he said. "Still, there is a difficulty about the rifles. There are ten cases of them here already. They are marked hardware and engine fittings."

Harper gasped. "Well, I'm blanked!" he said. "I guess it's the only time any kind of a greaser got ahead of me."

"Then they must be taken away," said Appleby. "Where are they, Don Maccario? If you do not tell me I shall certainly find them."

"In the iron store shed, I understand. They would have been sent for at night to-morrow."

"Get them out," said Appleby, turning to Harper. "They will be safer lying on the cane trucks in the open than anywhere."

Harper went out, and Maccario poured out a glass of wine. "It is fortunate you are a friend of mine, and one in whom

APPLEBY PROVES OBDURATE

I have confidence," he said. "Had it been otherwise you would have run a very serious risk, Don Bernardino."

Appleby laughed, though he was glad that he sat in the shadow. "I can, at least, let you have four hundred pesetas if the Sin Verguenza want them; but you will remember that if more rifles arrive here I will send them to Morales."

"In silver?" said Maccario. "I have samples of tobacco to carry, and a mule."

Appleby brought out two bags of silver from the chest in his office, for golden coin was almost as scarce in Cuba then as it usually is in Spain, and the two talked of different subjects with a frankness that concealed their thoughts, until there was a rattle of wheels as Harper passed below with several men pushing a little truck along the cane tramway. By and by he came in and sat down.

"The cases are marked as he told us, and I've left them on the line," he said. "I guess nobody would think of looking for rifles there. When are your friends coming for them, Maccario?"

"I think that is better not mentioned," said Maccario. "Those cases will, however, not be there to-morrow."

"And your men?" said Appleby. "I cannot have them here."

"You will listen to reason, my friend. I know you are one who keeps his word, and we will send no more rifles here. Still, those men work well, and the Señor Harding is not a Loyalist. He is here to make the dollars, and because the Spaniards are masters of Cuba he will not offend them. By and by, however, there is a change, and when it is we who hold the reins it may count much for him that he was also a friend of ours."

"You know he is not a Loyalist?" said Appleby.

Maccario laughed a little. "Can you doubt it — while the hacienda of San Cristoval stands? There are many burnt sugar mills in Cuba, my friend."

"Now," said Harper dryly, "it seems to me he's talking the plainest kind of sense. Make him promise he'll give you warning, and take his men out quietly when he wants them for anything."

Maccario gave his promise, and they sat talking for awhile until there was a knocking at the door below, and Pancho,

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

who came up the stairway in haste, stopped where the light showed the apprehension in his olive face.

"Comes the Colonel Morales, and there are cazadores in the cane," he said.

There was a sudden silence, and Maccario, who started to his feet, seized one of the bags of silver. He, however, nodded, and sat down again when Appleby's hand fell on his shoulder. There was, it was evident, no escaping now, for a quick tread showed that the officer was already ascending the stairway. Maccario made a little gesture of resignation.

"He has never seen me as a merchant of tobacco, and if he notices too much it is assuredly unfortunate for him," he said. "Pancho will already have the affair in hand."

Appleby said nothing, but he could feel his heart thumping painfully as he leaned on the table until Morales came in. He carried his kepi in one hand, and though he greeted Appleby punctiliously there was a little gleam in his eyes, while for just a moment he glanced keenly at Maccario. In the meanwhile Appleby saw Pancho's face at the lattice behind his shoulder, and surmised that Morales was running a heavy risk just then. He had little esteem for the Spanish colonel, but it seemed to him that the fate of the San Cristoval hacienda, as well as its manager, depended upon what happened during the next five minutes.

"You will take a glass of wine, and these cigars are good," he said.

Though every nerve in his body seemed to be tingling his voice was even; but while the officer poured out the wine Maccario laid a bundle of cigars before him, and smiled at Appleby.

"Your pardon, señor — but this is my affair," he said. "It is not often I have the opportunity of offering so distinguished a soldier my poor tobacco, though there are men of note in Havana and Madrid who appreciate its flavor, as well as the Señor Harding."

Morales glanced at him, and lighted a cigar; but Appleby fancied he was at least as interested in the bag of silver on the table.

"The tobacco is excellent," he said.

Maccario took out a card. "If you will keep the bundle it would be an honor," he said. "If you are still pleased when

APPLEBY PROVES OBDURATE

you have smoked them this will help you to remember where more can be obtained. We"—and he dropped his voice confidentially—"do not insist upon usual prices when supplying distinguished officers."

"That is wise," said Morales, who took the cigars. "It is not often they have the pesetas to meet such demands with. You will not find business flourishing in this country, which we have just swept clean of the Sin Verguenza. They have a very keen scent for silver."

"No," said Maccario plaintively. "There are also so many detentions and questions to be answered that it is difficult to make a business journey."

Morales laughed. "It is as usual—you would ask for something? Still, they are good cigars!"

"I would venture to ask an endorsement of my cedula. With that one could travel with less difficulty."

He brought out the strip of paper, and Morales turned to Appleby. "This gentlemen is a friend of yours?"

Appleby nodded, and the officer scribbled across the back of the cedula, and then, flinging it on the table, rose with a faint shrug of impatience.

"A word with you in private!" he said.

Appleby went out with him into the veranda, and set his lips for a moment when he saw, though Morales did not, a stealthy shadow flit out of it. He also surmised there were more men lurking in the patio beneath, and felt that a disaster was imminent if Maccario's apprehensions led him to do anything precipitate. Then it seemed scarcely likely that the colonel of cazadores would leave the place alive. Still, his voice did not betray him.

"I am at your service, señor," he said.

"The affair is serious," said Morales dryly. "I am informed that there are arms concealed in your factory. Ten cases of them, I understand, are in your store shed."

If he had expected any sign of consternation he did not see it, for Appleby smiled incredulously.

"If so, they were put there without my consent or knowledge, but I fancy your spies have been mistaken," he said. "Will you come with me and search the shed?"

Morales made a little gesture of assent. "I have men not far away, but I am a friend of the Señor Harding's, and it

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

seemed to me the affair demanded discretion," he said. "That is why I left them until I had spoken with you. Still, if we do not find those arms nobody will be better pleased than me."

They went down the stairway, and Appleby bade a man in the patio summon his comrades. Then they walked along the tramway towards an iron shed, where there was a delay while one of the men lighted a lantern and opened the door. When this was done they went in, and for almost an hour the peons rolled out barrels and dragged about boxes and cases, of which they opened one here and there. Still, there was no sign of a rifle, and when they had passed through two or three other sheds Morales' face was expressionless as he professed himself satisfied. They walked back silently side by side, until the officer stopped by a cane truck and rubbed off the ash from his cigar on one of the cases that lay upon it. He also moved a little so that he could see Appleby's face in the light of the lantern a dusky workman held. The latter was eyeing Morales curiously, and Appleby fancied by the way he bent his right hand that very little would bring the wicked, keen-pointed knife flashing from his sleeve.

"It seems that my informants have been mistaken," said the colonel. "I can only recommend you the utmost discretion. It is — you understand — necessary."

He turned with a little formal salutation and walked down the tram-line, while the dusty workman smiled curiously as he straightened his right hand. Appleby gasped and went back slowly, while he flung himself down somewhat limply into a chair when he reached his living-room, where Harper sat alone.

"Where is Maccario?" he asked.

"Lit out!" said Harper dryly. "He'd had 'bout enough of it, though I guess his nerves are good. Kind of a strain on your own ones too?"

Appleby's face showed almost haggard, and he smiled wearily.

"It is evident that if we have much more of this kind of thing I shall earn my salary, though the Sin Verguenza will apparently get most of it," he said.

XV

TONY'S LAST OPPORTUNITY

THE sun shone pleasantly warm, and a soft wind sighed among the branches, when Violet Wayne pulled up her ponies where the shadows of the firs fell athwart the winding road that dipped to Northrop valley. There had been a shower, and a sweet resinous fragrance came out of the dusky wood. Godfrey Palliser, who sat by the girl's side, however, shivered a little, and buttoned the big fur-trimmed coat that lay loose about him, which did not escape his companion's attention.

"Shall we drive out into the sun?" she asked.

"No," said the man, "I think I should be just as chilly, and the view from here pleases me. It is scarcely likely that I shall see it very often again."

Violet Wayne shook her head reproachfully as she glanced at him, though she felt that the prediction might be verified, for Godfrey Palliser had never been a strong man in any respect, and though he sat stiffly upright he looked very worn and frail just then. The pallor of his face also struck a little chill through her, for her pulses throbbed with the vigor of youth, and all the green world about her seemed to speak of life and hope. Yet there was a gravity in her eyes, which suggested that the shadow of care also rested upon her.

"That is not the spirit to hasten one's recovery, and you have been ever so much better lately," she said.

There was a curious wistfulness in Godfrey Palliser's smile, and he laid a thin hand upon her arm. "I should like a little longer respite, if it was only to see you Tony's wife," he said. "Then I should know that what I had striven for so long would be worthily accomplished. Still, since my last illness I have other warnings than those the eminent specialist gave me, and I do not know at what hour the summons may come."

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

At the mention of Tony the shadow deepened for a moment in the girl's face, for it seemed to her there was a meaning behind what the old man had said which chimed with the misgivings that had troubled her of late. Still, she was loyal, and would not admit it even to herself.

"Tony would have made you a worthy successor in any case," she said.

Godfrey Palliser smiled curiously. "Tony has many likable qualities, but he is weak," he said. "That, my dear, is one reason I am glad that he is going to marry you, for it is a burden I shall, I think very shortly, bequeath him. You will help him to lighten it, as well as bear it honorably."

"There are, as you know, women in this country who would not consider it a burden," said the girl.

Godfrey Palliser stretched out his hand and pointed to the vista of sunlit valley which, framed by the dark fir branches, opened up before them. Green beech wood, springing wheat, and rich meadow rolled away into the blue distance under a sky of softest azure, with the river flashing in the midst of them. Across the valley, under its sheltering hill-slope the gray front of Northrop Hall showed through embowering trees, and the tower of a little time-worn church rose in the foreground. It was this, Violet Wayne noticed, the old man's eyes rested longest on.

"It will all be yours and Tony's from this bank of the river as far as the beech woods where Sir George's land breaks in, and it is a burden I have found heavy enough these thirty years," he said. "The debt was almost crushing when it came to me, and rents were going down, while one can look for very little from agricultural property. I did what I could, and thanks to the years of economy the load is a little lighter now; but once I betrayed the trust reposed in me, and failed in my duty."

Violet Wayne could not quite hide her astonishment, for no shadow of reproach had ever touched the punctilious Godfrey Palliser. He smiled when he saw the incredulity in her eyes.

"It is quite true, and yet the temptation to deceive myself was almost irresistible," he said. "For thirty years I had lived at Northrop with the good will of my tenants and my neighbors' esteem, and if that counted for too much with me it was because I felt I held the honor of the name in trust to

TONY'S LAST OPPORTUNITY

be passed on unblemished to you and Tony, and those who would come after you. That was why I yielded, and it is only because you will be Tony's wife I make confession now."

"You are cold," said the girl hastily. "We will drive out into the sunshine."

Godfrey Palliser nodded, but he turned to her again as the ponies went slowly down the hill. "It is necessary that you should listen, because the man may live to trouble you," he said. "It never became apparent who killed Davidson — for killed he was — but Tony and I knew, though I strove to convince myself the man I should have exposed might be innocent. Bernard Appleby would not have escaped to America if I had done my duty. Had the warrant been signed when it should have been Stitt would have arrested him."

"You cannot believe that Bernard Appleby was guilty!"

"I am sure, my dear. I would not admit it, but I knew it then — and still, perhaps, I had excuses. The man was of my own blood, and I had meant, when he had proved his right to it, to do something for him. Tony is generous, and would not have grudged what I purposed to spare for him. It was a crushing blow, and left me scarcely capable of thinking, while before I quite realized it the thing was done, and I had become an accessory to the escape of a criminal."

He stopped, gasped a little, for he had spoken with a curious intensity of expression; but the girl looked at him steadily.

"Still," she said quietly, "I am not convinced yet."

"No? It is quite plain to me that it could only have been him or Tony, and the latter suggestion is preposterous."

"Yes," said the girl, who shivered a little, though the sun was warm. "Of course it is! Still, I cannot believe that the culprit was Bernard Appleby."

Palliser smiled faintly. "One could envy you your charity, my dear, but I have a charge to lay on you. That man may come back — and Tony would temporize. You, however, will show him no mercy. Not one penny of the Northrop rents must be touched by him — and now we will talk of something pleasanter."

Violet Wayne shook the reins, and made an effort; but the old man appeared exhausted, and she was glad that he evinced

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

no great interest in her conversation. What he had told her had left its sting, for she had already been almost driven to the decision he had come to. Appleby, she felt, — why she did not exactly know, though the belief was unshakable, — could not have done the horrible thing, and all the love and loyalty she possessed revolted against the suggestion that Tony was guilty. Yet the brightness seemed to have gone out of the sunlight, and the vista of wood and meadow lost its charm, while the shadow deepened in her face as they drove down into the valley.

Her mother was waiting on the terrace when they reached Northrop Hall, and when Palliser had gone into the house leaning on a man's shoulder she looked at the girl curiously.

"You are a trifle pale, Violet," she said. "Of course, it is almost a duty, and he seems more tranquil in your company; but I have fancied lately that you spend too much time with Godfrey Palliser. He seems unusually feeble."

"I do not think he is as well to-day," said the girl.

"He has sent for lawyer Craythorne," said her mother thoughtfully. "Well, you must shake off any morbid fancies he may have infected you with. You have Tony to consider, and he has been moody lately. I scarcely like to mention it, my dear, but I wonder if you have noticed that he is not quite so abstemious as he was a little while ago."

A flush of crimson crept into the girl's cheek, and once more the little chill struck through her, but she met the elder lady's eyes.

"I think you must be mistaken, mother," she said.

She turned and went into the house, but Mrs. Wayne sighed as she walked thoughtfully up and down the terrace, for she had noticed more than she had mentioned, and had fancies that were not pleasant to her. She had borne much sorrow in her time with a high courage, but she was anxious that afternoon, for it seemed to her that there might be a grim reality behind those fancies.

Godfrey Palliser insisted on dining with his guests that evening, which he had seldom done since his illness, and his four companions, among whom was the lawyer who had done his business for thirty years, long remembered that meal. Their host was dressed with his usual precision, and sat stiffly erect, as though disdaining the support the high-backed

TONY'S LAST OPPORTUNITY

chair that had been brought him might afford, but the sombre garments emphasized the pallor of his face, until, as the glow of the sinking sun streamed in through the colored lights above the western window, a ruddy gleam fell upon it. In that forced brilliancy its hollowness and fragility became more apparent, and it was almost a relief to those who sat at meat with him when the hall grew shadowy. He ate very little, and scarcely spoke to any one but Violet, though his voice was curiously gentle when he did so; and when he sat silent his eyes would rest on her and Tony with a little contented smile.

Though they did what they could to hide it, there was a constraint upon the party which the very servants seemed to feel, for Tony fancied they were more swift and noiseless in their movements than usual. He also noticed the curious look in one man's eyes when, though the light was scarcely fading outside, Godfrey Palliser signed to him.

"Bring lights. I cannot see," he said.

The lights were brought, naked wax candles in great silver holders, and their pale gleam flung back from glass and silver had a curious effect in the lingering daylight. There was silence for awhile, and Tony was grateful to Mrs. Wayne, who broke it tactfully; but the vague uneasiness remained, and more than one of those who saw the strained expression in his eyes wondered whether it was the last time Godfrey Palliser would dine in state at Northrop Hall. Nobody was sorry when Mrs. Wayne rose, but Palliser smiled at his nephew when Violet went out of the room with her.

"You will spare me a few minutes, Tony. I have something to ask you," he said. "We need have no diffidence in speaking before Mr. Craythorne."

The elderly lawyer bent his head, and Tony felt uneasy. "I shall be glad to tell you anything I can, sir," he said.

"It is rather your opinion than information I want," said Palliser. "Some time ago you tried to convince me of Bernard's innocence, while to-day Violet persisted that she could not believe him guilty — even when I pointed out that so far as I could see the culprit was either you or he. Are you still as sure Bernard was not the man responsible for Davidson's death as you were then? I am not asking without a purpose, and the fact that we are honored with Craythorne's company

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

will show you that I consider it necessary to set my house in order. It may be yours very soon now, Tony."

His low, even voice jarred upon one listener, and Tony spoke no more than the truth when he broke out, "I hope you will hold it a good many years yet, sir!"

"Yes," said Palliser, with a little smile, which something in his eyes redeemed from being coldly formal, "I believe you though I scarcely think it likely. Still, you have not answered my question."

"My opinion is not worth much, sir."

"I have asked you for it," said Palliser. "Nobody knows Bernard so well as you do, and while I have scarcely a doubt in my own mind, Violet's faith in him had its effect on me. After all, he belongs to us, and I would like to believe him innocent, incredible as it seems, or at least to hear something in extenuation. You will think me illogical in this, Craythorne?"

Craythorne smiled. "Then I admit that, being a lawyer, I am more so, for I would believe in Bernard Appleby against the evidence of my eyes. It also seems to me that the intuitions of young women of Miss Wayne's kind merit more respect than they usually receive."

"I am still waiting, Tony," said Palliser.

Tony sat silent almost too long, for the words "either you or he" troubled him. Had Godfrey Palliser not spoken them he might have answered differently, but as it was his apprehensions overcame him.

"It is a hard thing to admit, but I am afraid my views have changed since then," he said.

The lawyer regarded him covertly, and noticed the furtiveness of his eyes, but Palliser sighed. "You have," he said, "nothing to urge in extenuation?"

"No, sir," said Tony. "I wish I had!"

"Then you will be so much the richer," said Palliser dryly. "Now Violet will be waiting, and Craythorne and I have a good deal to do. I shall retire when we have finished. Good night, Tony!"

He held out his hand when Tony rose, and the younger man noticed how cold his fingers felt. "Good night, sir," he said. "I trust you will feel brighter in the morning."

The chilly fingers still detained him, and Palliser said very

TONY'S LAST OPPORTUNITY

quietly, "One never knows what may happen, Tony; but it would be my wish that you and Violet did not wait very long."

Tony went out with a curious throbbing of his pulses and a horrible sense of degradation, for he knew that he had perjured himself to a dying man who trusted him. The room he entered was dimly lighted, but he knew where the spirit stand and siphon were kept, and a liberal measure of brandy was frothing in the glass, when there was a light step behind him and a hand touched his arm.

"No!" said a low voice with a little ring of command in it.

Tony started, and swinging round with a dark flush in his face saw Violet Wayne looking at him. There was also a little more color than usual in her cheeks, but her eyes were steady, which Tony's were not.

"I never expected you, Violet," he said. "You made me feel like a boy caught with his hand in the jam-pot. It's humiliating as well as ludicrous!"

The girl smiled very faintly. "I am afraid it is," she said. "Do you know, Tony, that this is the hardest thing I have ever done in my life?"

Tony saw the slight trembling of her lips, and laughed somewhat inanely as he held out his hands.

"I think I needed it!" he said; and in a sudden fit of rage seized the glass and, moving a few steps forward, flung it crashing into the grate. Then he turned and faced the girl, flushed to the forehead, but stirred to almost unwilling respect.

"There is not one woman of your station in a thousand who would have had the courage to do that," he said. "Still, it is preposterous to think that there was the least reason for it."

"Tony," said the girl very slowly, "I fancy I should hate you if you ever made it necessary for me to do as much again, but we will try not to remember it. What has been troubling you?"

Tony was glad of the opening, though under different circumstances he would not have availed himself of it.

"I'll try to tell you," he said. "I am afraid Godfrey Palliser is very shaky. In fact he was oppressively morbid to-night."

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"No," said the girl. "I know what you mean, but morbid is not the right word. Your uncle is now and then pedantic, but one could only feel respect for him to-day."

"Of course!" said Tony. "I shall be very genuinely sorry if his fancies turn out right. That, however, is not the question. He asked me if I still believed in Bernard, and I had a difficult thing to do. It seems that your faith in the man had almost convinced him. He wanted to believe him innocent, and leave him something in his will."

"And you told him—"

"What could I tell him? Only that I was not so sure of Bernard as I had been."

There was a gleam of something very like anger in Violet Wayne's eyes. "So you shattered the faint hope he clung to, and turned the forgiveness, which, mistaken or not, would have been a precious thing just now, into vindictive bitterness!"

"He asked me," said Tony. "What could I do?"

"You could have defended your friend — the man who has done so much for you."

Tony stared at her, and once more the girl felt a little shiver of apprehension when she saw his face, but in a moment he recovered himself.

"I want to know exactly what you mean by that?" he said.

"Is n't it evident from what you have told me of your early days?"

Tony's apprehension disappeared, for it seemed he had been mistaken. "Of course!" he said. "Still, the difficulty was that I could n't urge anything. I can't see why you believe in Bernard, Violet. Is n't it plain that — it must have been either he or I?"

Tony was not devoid of a certain cunning, and the boldness of the question had its effect, but the girl's eyes gleamed as she said, "I could almost as soon believe you guilty as Bernard Appleby."

"Then," said Tony with a quietness which served him very well, "I am sorry you have so little confidence in me!"

Violet stood still a moment, a trifle pale in face, and very erect. Then she made a little gesture, and her lips trembled.

"Tony," she said simply, "you will forgive me that, though

TONY'S LAST OPPORTUNITY

I scarcely deserve it. If I could have meant it would I have done — what I did a little while ago?"

Tony caught her hands, and would have drawn her to him, but the girl shook off his grasp and slipped away, while the man stood still until the door closed behind her, and then shook his head.

"Angry yet!" he said. "If one could only understand her — but it's quite beyond me, and I've no inclination for further worries of any kind just now."

He turned towards the cupboard again, stopped a moment, and then, with a little impatient gesture, went out of the room. He did not see Violet again that night, and went to bed early, though it was long before he slept. It was early morning when he was awakened by the sound of a door being opened suddenly and a hasty running up and down. In a few minutes there were voices beneath him in the hall, while he huddled on his clothes; and going out he stood a moment, irresolute, in the corridor. A man who seemed to tread in a curious fashion was coming down the stairs, and passed apparently without noticing him. Then Tony gasped as the Darsley doctor he had sent for touched his arm, for he could see the man's face dimly in the faint gray light.

"Yes," said the doctor quietly, answering the unspoken question. "I never expected it would come so suddenly, or I would have sent for you. Godfrey Palliser passed away ten minutes ago."

XVI

DANE COP

IT was a dismal wet afternoon when Tony Palliser stood bareheaded beside a dripping yew tree under the eastern window of Northrop church. His head was aching, for the last few days and nights had not passed pleasantly with him, and confused as his thoughts were he realized what he owed to the man the bearers were then waiting to carry to his resting place. Godfrey Palliser had been autocratic and a trifle exacting, but he had taken his nephew into the place of his dead son, and bestowed all he had on him, while Tony remembered what his part had been. He had with false words hindered the dying man making a reparation which would have lightened his last hours.

Tony was not usually superstitious, or addicted to speculation about anything that did not concern the present world, but as he glanced at the faces close packed beyond the tall marble pillar with its gleaming cross, and heard the words of ponderous import the surpliced vicar read, he was troubled by a vague sense of fear. Godfrey Palliser had gone out into the unknown, unforgiving, and with heart hardened against his kinsman who had done no wrong, but it seemed to Tony that the man who had deceived him would be held responsible.

By and by somebody touched his arm, the droning voice died away, there was a shuffle of feet, and he watched the bearers, who vanished with their burden beyond a narrow granite portal. Then the voice that seemed faint and indistinct went on again, there was a grinding of hinges, an iron gate closed with a crash, and though Tony felt the damp upon his forehead he straightened himself with a little sigh of relief. He need, at least, no longer fear the righteous indignation of Godfrey Palliser, who had gone down into the darkness with his trust in him unshaken.

DANE COP

Still, it was with an effort he met the rows of faces that were turned in his direction as he walked slowly between them to the gate. They were respectfully sympathetic, for Godfrey Palliser had held the esteem of his tenants and neighbors, who had only good will for the man who would succeed him. They still stood bareheaded, for the most part, in the rain, and Tony closed the fingers of one hand tight, for he had erred from fear and weakness and not with deliberate intent, and the men's silent homage hurt him.

It was but a short drive back to the hall, and bracing himself for a last effort he met the little group of kinsmen and friends who were assembled about lawyer Craythorne in the great dining-room. Nobody desired to prolong the proceedings, and there was a little murmur of approbation when the elderly lawyer took out the will. He read it in a low, clear voice, while the rain lashed the windows and the light grew dim. Providing for certain charges and a list of small legacies it left Tony owner of the Northrop property. His nearest kinsman shook hands with him.

"It is a burdened inheritance, Tony, and perhaps the heaviest obligation attached to it is that of walking in its departed owner's steps," he said. "There are not many men fit to take his place, but you have our confidence, and, I think, the good will of everybody on the estate."

There was a little murmur, and a gray-haired farmer, who was a legatee, also shook Tony's hand.

"I've lived under your uncle, and his father too," he said. "They were gentlemen of the right kind, both of them, and this would have been a sadder day for Northrop if we hadn't a man we trusted to step into Godfrey Palliser's shoes!"

Tony did not know what he answered, but his voice broke, and he stood leaning silently on a chair back while the company filed out and left him with the lawyer. The latter was, however, a little puzzled by his attitude, for he had seen other men betray at least a trace of content under similar circumstances, while there was apparently only care in Tony's face.

"I would not ask your attention just now, only that the affair is somewhat urgent, and I must go back to town this evening," he said. "As you know, the electrical manufacturing company have been desirous of purchasing a site for a factory at Dane Cop, and I expect the manager to-morrow.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

The price he is willing to pay is, I think, a fair one; and as they will get their power from the river there will be little smoke or other nuisance, while the establishing of this industry cannot fail to improve the value of the adjacent land. I have their proposals with me, and I fancy we could see the suggested site for the dam and factory from the window."

Tony went with him and looked out on the dripping valley which lay colorless under the rain and driving cloud. The swollen river which had spread across the low meadows flowed through the midst of it, and all the prospect was gray and dreary.

"Of course we need the money, but I do not feel greatly tempted," he said. "Rows of workmen's dwellings are scarcely an ornament to an estate, and there are other drawbacks to the introduction of a manufacturing community. I am not sure that it would not rather be my duty to make up for what we should lose through letting them find another site by personal economy."

The lawyer nodded. "Your point of view is commendable, but as the company seem quite willing to agree to any reasonable stipulations as to the type of workmen's dwellings, and would do what they could to render the factory pleasant to the eye, I should urge you to make the bargain," he said. "I wonder if you know that your uncle had for a long while decided that Dane Cop should go to Bernard Appleby. It has but little agricultural value, and is almost cut off from the estate by Sir George's property, but he realized that with its abundant water power it would, now the local taxation in the cities is growing so burdensome, sooner or later command attention as a manufacturing site. It is somewhat curious that this offer should come just when it has passed out of Appleby's hands."

Tony made a little abrupt movement. "This is the only time I have heard of it," he said. "Well, if you are convinced it would be a wise thing you may sell."

The lawyer looked at him curiously, and wondered what had so swiftly changed his views. "You have until to-morrow afternoon to consider it in," he said. "In any case, I should not commit myself until you have approved of all conditions and stipulations."

"If you consider them reasonable you can sell, but I would

DANE COP

have the purchase money invested separately, and whatever dividend or interest I derive from it kept apart in the accounts. You understand?"

"It is only a question of book-keeping. You have no doubt a reason for wishing it?"

"I think you would call it a fancy," said Tony, with a curious smile. "Still, I want it done."

The lawyer went out, and for half an hour Tony sat alone with a haggard face in the gloomy room listening to the patter of the rain. It had ceased, however, when he drove Violet Wayne, who had remained at Northrop with her mother, home. Mrs. Wayne was to follow with a neighbor, and Tony and the girl were alone in the dog-cart, which went splashing down the miry road until he pulled the horse up where the river came roaring down in brown flood under a straggling wood on the side of a hill. Tony glanced at the flying vapors overhead, wet trees, and dimly gleaming water that spread among the rushes on the meadow land, while the hoarse clamor of the flood almost drowned his voice when he turned to his companion.

"That force will no longer go to waste. I told Craythorne to-day he could let the people who want to put up their mill have the land," he said. "He told me something I have not heard before. It appears that Godfrey Palliser had intended this strip of the property for Appleby. It could be converted into money without any detriment to the rest, you see."

"Hopkins always complained that Dane Cop was not worth the rent, but it will bring you in a good revenue now," said the girl. "Still, does n't that seem a little hard upon the man who has lost it?"

Tony flicked the horse with the whip. "The land was Godfrey Palliser's, and he did what he thought was right with it."

"I almost fancy he would not have left it to you if you had only had a little more faith in your friend."

Tony turned his head away. "You mean if I had defended Bernard when Godfrey sent for me? Still, I would like you to believe that if he had left the land to Bernard it would have pleased me."

"Of course! Could you have urged nothing in his favor, Tony?"

"No," said Tony, and Violet noticed how his fingers

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

tightened on the reins. "Nothing whatever. I don't want to remember that night. What took place then hurt me."

"Have you ever heard from Appleby?"

"Once. He was then in Texas."

"You answered him?"

"No," said Tony slowly, "I did not. The whole affair was too painful to me. I thought it would be better if I heard no more of him."

Violet said nothing, but she turned and looked back at the flooded meadows and dripping hillside that should have been Appleby's, and a vague feeling of displeasure against Tony for his disbelief came upon her. She knew that everybody would agree with his attitude, but she could not compel herself to admit that it was warranted. When she turned again she saw that he was looking at her curiously.

"Godfrey Palliser told me another thing that night I have not mentioned yet," he said. "It was his wish that what he seems to have known would happen should not keep us waiting. Now, I feel the responsibility thrust upon me, and know that he was right when he foresaw that you would help me to bear it as he had done. I want you, Violet — more than I can tell you."

Tony's appeal was perfectly genuine. Godfrey Palliser could ask no more questions, Appleby's silence could be depended upon, and the cautious inquiries he had made through a London agency respecting Lucy Davidson had elicited the fact that she had taken to the stage and then apparently sailed for Australia. He had, he admitted, done wrong, but he resolved that he would henceforward live honorably, and, if it were permitted him, make Appleby some convenient reparation. Violet, who noticed the wistfulness in his eyes, responded to the little thrill in his voice, and but for what had passed a few minutes earlier might perhaps have promised to disregard conventionalities and hasten the wedding. As it was, however, she felt a curious constraint upon her, and a hesitation she could not account for.

"No," she said quietly. "We must wait, Tony."

"Why?" said the man. "It was his wish that we should not."

His companion looked at him, and there was something he failed to attach a meaning to in her eyes. "I can't tell you,"

DANE COP.

she said slowly. " Still, you must not urge me, Tony. I feel that no good can come of it if we fail to show respect to him."

" But — " said the man; and Violet laid her hand upon his arm.

" Tony," she said, " be patient. I can't make what I feel quite plain, but we must wait."

" Well," said Tony with a sigh, " I will try to do without you until your mother thinks a fitting time has come."

" Then, if nothing very dreadful happens in the meanwhile, I will be ready."

Tony flicked the horse until it endeavored to break into a gallop, and then viciously tightened his grip on the reins.

" You put it curiously," he said. " What could happen?"

" I don't know," said the girl. " Perhaps what took place so unexpectedly a few days ago has shaken me, for I feel vaguely apprehensive just now. I know of no reason why this should be, but we are all a prey to fancies now and then."

Tony looked down on her compassionately. " The last few days at Northrop have been too much for you — and I was a selfish brute for not sending you home," he said.

Violet made no answer, and there was silence between them while the dog-cart splashed on down the muddy road.

It was some weeks later when one afternoon Violet Wayne, who had undertaken the embroidery of an altar cloth, entered Northrop church. It was little and old and shadowy, but the colored lights of the high west window drove a track of brilliancy through its quiet duskiness. Nobody knew the exact history of Northrop church, but it had evidently once been larger than it was then, for the spacious chancel with its carved stalls and rood screen bore no proportion to the contracted nave. Violet entered it softly, with eyes still partly dazzled by the contrast with the sunlit meadows she had crossed, and then stopped in faint astonishment as she saw a girl of her own age standing in evident admiration before an effigy on a tomb. It had been hewn in marble by an unknown sculptor centuries ago, but there was a rude grandeur in his conception, and the chivalric spirit of bygone ages seemed living in the stone.

The girl who stood before it started visibly when Violet walked up the aisle. She was slight and spare, with vivacious blue eyes and fluffy brown hair.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"I am afraid I startled you," said Violet.

"Yes," said the stranger, "you did. I was too intent on the sculpture to hear you coming. It's—just lovely. I wonder whether you could tell me who he was, or what it means, if you live round here."

There was very little accent in her speech, but it was quick, and Violet knew that most Englishwomen would not have expressed themselves so frankly to a stranger. Still, it was evident that the girl had artistic tastes, for the effigy had often stirred her own appreciation. It portrayed a mailed knight, not recumbent, but kneeling on one knee, with hands clenched on the hilt of a sword. A dinted helm lay beside him, and though it and his mail had suffered from iconoclastic zeal or time, the face was perfect, and almost living in its intensity of expression. It was not, however, devotional, but grim and resolute, and it had seemed to Violet that there was a great purpose in those sightless eyes.

"I am afraid I can't," she said. "He is supposed to have been one of the Pallisers, but it is not certain that he is even buried here, and nobody knows what he did. The sculpture may be purely allegorical. Still, the face is very suggestive."

The blue-eyed girl looked at it fixedly. "Yes," she said. "One would call it Fidelity. We have nothing of the kind in our country, and that is partly why it appeals to me. Yet I once met a man who looked just like that."

"In America!" and Violet Wayne was vexed with herself next moment because she smiled.

The stranger straightened herself a trifle, but there was rather appreciation than anger in her eyes.

"Well," she said, "I am proud of my country, but he was an Englishman, and it was in Cuba—in the rebellion."

She turned and looked curiously at her companion, in a fashion that almost suggested that she recognized the finely moulded figure, grave gray eyes, and gleaming hair, while Violet made a slight deprecatory gesture.

"I can show you another memorial which is almost as beautiful," she said. "In this case, however, what it stands for is at least authentic. A famous artist designed it."

The girl turned and gazed backwards along the shafts of light that pierced the dusky nave until her eyes caught the gleam of the gilded Gloria high up the dimness, above the west

DANE COP

window. Then they rested with awed admiration on the face of a great winged angel stooping with outstretched hand. She drew in her breath with a little sigh of appreciation which warmed Violet's heart to her, and then glancing down from the flaming picture read: "To the glory of God, and in memory of Walthew Palliser, killed in the execution of his duty in West Africa."

"Yes," she said, "it's beautiful. But they should be together. The great compassionate angel over the effigy. It makes you feel the words, 'Well done!'"

Violet smiled gravely. "I think I understand, and one could fancy that they were spoken. The man to whom they raised that window went, unarmed, sick of fever, and knowing the risk he ran, to make peace with a rebellious tribe, because it was evident that it would provoke hostilities if he took troops with him. He found a stockade on the way, and, though his bearers tried to hinder him, went forward alone to parley. He was shot almost to pieces with ragged cast iron."

"He was splendid," said the stranger. "And his name was Walthew — it is a curious one. I must thank you for telling me the story."

She would apparently have said more, but that a girl in light dress and big white hat came in through a little door behind the organ, and laughed as she approached them.

"So you have been making friends with Nettie, Violet! I was going to bring her over one of these days," she said. "Netting Harding of Glenwood on the Hudson — Violet Wayne! Nettie is staying with me, and as she is enthusiastic over antiquities I was bringing her here when Mrs. Vicar buttonholed me. They are short of funds for the Darsley sewing guild again. Will you come over to-morrow afternoon? Tea on the lawn."

Violet promised and took her departure, while when the other two went out into the sunshine again Nettie Harding's companion glanced at her.

"How did Violet Wayne strike you, — which I think is how you would put it?" she said.

Nettie appeared reflective. "I think I should like her. The curious thing is that a friend of mine pictured her to me almost exactly, though he did not tell me who she was. Still, at first I fancied she meant me to feel my inferiority."

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"That is a thing Violet Wayne would never do," said her companion. "I don't know where she got that repose of hers — but it's part of her, and she does n't put it on. Who was the man who spoke about her?"

"He did n't speak of her — he only told me about somebody who must have been like her," said Nettie Harding, who considered it advisable not to answer the question. "The Pallisers are evidently big people here. Is Walthew a usual name in the family? Miss Wayne seemed to know a good deal about them."

The other girl laughed. "I believe there were several Walthews, and Violet is, perhaps, proud of the connection," she said. "They are an old family, and she is going to marry one of them."

XVII

TONY IS PAINFULLY ASTONISHED

THE cool shadows were creeping across the velvet grass next afternoon when Nettie Harding lay languidly content in a canvas chair on the Low Wood lawn. Behind her rose a long, low, red-roofed dwelling, whose gray walls showed only here and there through their green mantle of creeper, but in front, beyond the moss-covered terrace wall, wheatfield, coppice, and meadow flooded with golden sunlight melted through gradations of color into the blue distance. It was very hot, and the musical tinkle of a mower that rose from the valley emphasized the drowsy stillness. Opposite her, on the other side of the little table whereon stood dainty china and brass kettle, sat her hostess's daughter, Hester Earle, and she smiled a little as she glanced at Nettie.

"You are evidently not pining for New York!" she said.

Nettie Harding laughed as she looked about her with appreciative eyes. "This is quite good enough for me, and we don't live in New York," she said. "Nobody who can help it does, and it's quite a question how to take out of it the men who have to work there. Our place is on the Hudson, and it's beautiful, though I admit it is different from this. We haven't had the time to smooth down everything and round the corners off in our country, though when we are as old as you are we'll have considerably more to show the world."

Hester Earle nodded tranquilly. She was typically English, and occasionally amused at Nettie, with whom she had made friends in London. Her father was chairman of a financial corporation that dealt in American securities, and having had business with Cyrus Harding, thought it advisable to show his daughter what attention he could.

"You were enthusiastic over Northrop church and the Palliser memorials yesterday," she said.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"Yes," said Nettie, "I was, but I should like to see the kind of men to whom they put them up. From what you said there are still some of them living in this part of your country?"

"There is one at Northrop just now, and it is rather more than likely that you will see him this afternoon if he suspects that Violet Wayne is coming here. I think I hear her now."

There was a beat of hoofs and rattle of wheels behind the trees that shrouded the lawn, and five minutes later Violet and Tony Palliser crossed the strip of turf. Miss Earle lighted the spirit lamp, and for a space they talked of nothing in particular, while the pale blue flame burnt unwaveringly in the hot, still air. Then when the dainty cups were passed round Violet Wayne said —

"I think you told me yesterday the effigy reminded you of somebody you had seen, Miss Harding."

"Yes," said Nettie, "it did. I don't mean that the face was like his, because that would be too absurd, but it was the expression — the strength and weariness in it — that impressed me. The man I am thinking of looked just like that when he kept watch one long night through."

"How do you know he did?" asked Hester.

"Because I was there. I sat by a little lattice and watched him, knowing that my safety depended upon his vigilance."

"That was why Miss Harding was anxious to see you, Tony," said Hester Earle. "I almost fancy she is disappointed now."

Tony, who sat with half-closed eyes, teacup in hand, in his chair, looked up and smiled languidly. "I think it is just a little rough on me that I should be expected to emulate the fortitude an unknown sculptor hewed into a marble face hundreds of years ago," he said. "I wonder if Miss Harding would tell us about the man she is thinking of."

Nettie glanced at Violet Wayne, and fancied that she showed signs of interest. Besides Miss Harding was not averse to discoursing to an attentive audience.

"Well," she said, "I'll try. It was in Cuba, and he was an Englishman. A little while before the night I am going to speak about he and his American partner captured a Spanish gun."

"Then I don't see why you should have expected me to

TONY IS PAINFULLY ASTONISHED

resemble him," said Tony plaintively. "As everybody knows I should never have done such a thing! Will you tell us about the engagement?"

Nettie flashed a keen glance at him, and Violet Wayne, who saw it, felt a slight thrill of impatience, but not with the girl. It was, she fancied, evident that Nettie Harding agreed with Tony.

"It was in a hot barranco among the hills, and the Spaniards had turned the gun on the Sin Verguenza, and were sweeping them away, when he and the American lowered themselves down the rock side by creepers right into the middle of the loyalist troops. They hurled the gun over a precipice into the barranco, and when it had gone the rest of the Sin Verguenza drove the troops off with rifle fire. It was their colonel told me this. I did not see it."

"Would you mind telling us who the Sin Verguenza were?" said Tony.

"The men without shame—that's what it means in Spanish—an insurgent legion. They took the town in which my father and I were staying—a handful of ragged men, with two companies of drilled troops against them—and I lost my father in the crowd of fugitives. Then I hid in a church, and some drunken brigands were chasing me through the dark streets when I met the Englishman, who took care of me. The Sin Verguenza were breaking into the houses, and I was alone, horribly frightened and helpless, in that Cuban town. He was one of their officers, and he took me to the house they had made their headquarters."

"You went with him?" asked Hester Earle.

"Yes," said Nettie slowly, while a faint flush crept into her face, "I did. Nobody was safe from the Sin Verguenza then, and I felt I could trust him. There are men who make one feel like that, you know."

For no apparent reason she glanced at Violet Wayne, who sat with a curious expression in her eyes, looking—not at Tony, as Miss Harding noticed—but across the valley.

"Yes," she said, "there are. Go on, please!"

"I went with him to the rebel headquarters, and then very nearly tried to run away again, because it was like walking into the lion's den. The patio was littered with the furniture they had thrown out of the windows, and I could hear the

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

men roystering over their wine. Still, when I looked at the man with me, I went in."

She stopped and sat silent a space of seconds, while none of the others spoke. They felt it might not be advisable to ask questions.

"Well," she continued, "he hid me in a room, and then sat down on the veranda that ran round the patio outside it, where I could see him from the lattice. The city was in a turmoil, the insurgent leaders were carousing in the house, and you will remember they were the Sin Verguenza. There was only that man and his American comrade between me and those horrors. I think he fancied I rested, but all that awful night I scarcely took my eyes off him. He was very like the marble knight just then."

"Is n't that a little rough on the effigy?" said Tony with a smile. "The man was, I think you told us, a leader of shameless brigands."

Violet Wayne saw the gleam in Nettie's eyes, and noticed the faint ring in her voice as she said, "There are not many men who could lead the Sin Verguenza, but you would understand what I mean if you had seen him. He was ragged and very weary, and had been hurt in the fighting, but he sat there keeping himself awake, with his rifle across his knees, and every time I looked at his face it reassured me. It was haggard, but it was grim and strong — and I knew that man would have to be torn to pieces before any harm could come to me. He was keeping vigil with something entrusted to him which he would guard with his life — and that, I think, is the fancy that stirs one when one looks at your marble knight."

Hester smiled as she admitted that this was probably what the sculptor had wished to express, but it was in Violet Wayne's eyes that Nettie saw the most complete comprehension.

"That man almost deserved so stanch a champion," said Tony. "Eventually your father found you?"

"Yes," said Nettie. "The Sin Verguenza marched out in the early morning."

Then there was silence until Tony rose languidly. "I think I'll go and bring some more cake," he said. "You sit still, Hester. I'll ask Mrs. Grantly for it."

TONY IS PAINFULLY ASTONISHED

Hester Earle laughed. "She is out. Perhaps you had better show him where it is, Violet."

The two who were left were silent for awhile, and then Hester Earle smiled at her companion as she said, "You wanted to see Tony Palliser."

Nettie glanced suggestively towards Tony, who was then coming back across the lawn, carrying a tray.

"There is no reason why he should not do that kind of thing — but the trouble is that it seems quite natural to him, as though it was what he was meant to do," she said.

"Don't you think he could do anything else?"

Nettie appeared reflective. "It strikes me he would n't want to."

"Tony is a very good fellow," said Hester. "He has never done an ungraceful thing."

"Well," said Nettie, "I expect that is just what is wrong with him. It seems to me that the men who do what is worth doing can't always be graceful. The knight in the chancel had his helmet beaten in, while I fancy his mail was battered and dusty, and if the great glittering angel waited for the Palliser who was shot in Africa it was n't because he carried tea trays prettily."

"And yet Violet, who expects a good deal, is content with him."

"Well," said Nettie gravely, "I'm almost afraid she's giving herself away. I have seen the man who would have suited her — and he was a ragged leader of the Sin Verguenza."

"Had that man no taste?" asked Hester with a little laugh.

Nettie glanced down at the white hand she moved a little so that there was a flash from the ring. "That was there already. It was a man of the same kind who put it on."

Tony and Violet Wayne came up just then, and when they sat down Hester turned to the man. "We are getting up a concert in the Darsley assembly rooms for the sewing guild," she said. "We are, as usual, short of money. You will bring your banjo, and sing a coon song."

"It's too hot," said Tony. "Besides, folks expect a decorum I have n't been quite accustomed to from me now, and I'm not going to black my face for anybody. I would a good deal sooner give you the money."

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"That's very like you, Tony, but it's too easy, though we will take the money too. It's a good cause, or it would not be in difficulties. You will come and sing."

Tony made a gesture of resignation. "Well," he said, "it would take too much trouble to convince you that you had better get somebody else, and, anyway, I can have a cold."

Then the conversation turned on other topics until Tony and Violet took their leave, but when she shook hands with him Hester reminded Tony of his promise. It was, however, almost a month later when he was called upon to keep it, and finding no excuse available drove into the neighboring town one evening. He was welcomed somewhat effusively when he entered an ante-room of the assembly hall, and then taken to a place that had been kept for him beside Violet and her mother. The concert very much resembled others of the kind, and neither Tony nor his companions paid much attention to the music until Mrs. Wayne looked up from her programme.

"Thérèse Clavier. Costume dance!" she said. "No doubt they called it that to pacify the vicar. Well, she is pretty, if somewhat elaborately got up. Does n't she remind you of somebody, Violet?"

Tony glanced at the stage, and gasped. A girl with dark hair in voluminous flimsy draperies came on with a curtsey and a smile, and a little chill ran through him before he heard Violet's answer.

"Lucy Davidson. But of course it can't be she," she said. "This woman is older and has darker hair, though that, perhaps, does not count for very much, while Lucy could never have acquired her confidence."

Tony said nothing. He was staring across the rows of heads and watching the girl. She appeared older, bolder, and harder than Lucy Davidson had done, but the likeness was still unpleasantly suggestive. She danced well, but it was not the graceful posing or the swift folding and flowing of light draperies that held Tony's attention. His eyes were fixed upon the smiling face, and he scarcely heard the thunder of applause or Mrs. Wayne's voice in the silence that followed it.

"Effective, and yet nobody could take exception to it," she said. "But don't you come on next, Tony?"

TONY IS PAINFULLY ASTONISHED

Tony, who had not remembered it, stood up suddenly, knocking down the hat of a man beside him, and trod upon the girl's dress as he passed. She glanced up at him sharply, for he was seldom awkward in his movements, but he was looking another way. The audience was also getting impatient, and there was a clapping of hands and stamping of feet before he appeared upon the stage. Then he sat down fingering his banjo pegs, and twice asked the accompanist for a note on the piano.

"Any other man would have done that before," said Mrs. Wayne. "Still, I suppose Tony cannot help it, and he seems contented now."

There was a tinkle from the banjo followed by a chord on the piano, but Tony did not face the audience until the introduction had dragged through. Then Violet noticed that his voice, which was a sweet tenor, was not so clear as usual, and the silence of the piano emphasized his feeble touch on the strings. Still, Tony sang such songs as usually go with the banjo well, for the mingling of faint pathos and mild burlesque was within his grasp, which was, perhaps, not without its significance, and nobody appeared to find any fault with the performance. There was, in fact, enthusiastic applause, though Violet was glad when Tony persisted in leaving the stage, and her mother glanced at her.

"I have heard Tony put much more spirit into that song," she said.

Tony in the meanwhile was endeavoring to make his way quietly through the green-room when one of the committee touched his shoulder.

"Can't you spare us a few minutes?" he said. "Miss Clavier seemed to like your singing, and I think she would be pleased if you noticed her. When she heard it was a charity she came down for half her usual fee."

Tony was not grateful to the man who had detained him, and could it have been done without exciting comment would have shaken off his grasp. As it was, however, there was no avoiding the introduction, and he suffered himself to be led forward with unpleasant misgivings. Miss Clavier made him a somewhat dignified bow, but she also made room for him beside her, while something in her dark eyes warned Tony that it would be wise of him to accept the unspoken invita-

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

tion. He sat down, wondering what she wanted, until she smiled at him.

"There are coffee and ices in the other room, Tony," she said. "Will you take me there?"

The man realized that this mode of address had its significance, for it had been Mr. Palliser in the old days; but he rose gravely and held out his arm, knowing that what he did would not pass without comment. The feeling was also warranted, for one of the men who watched them pass out into the corridor smiled as he turned to his companion.

"Tony seems bent on doing rather more than was expected of him," he said. "No doubt she knows his standing in the neighborhood, and intends this as a delicate compliment to one or two of our lady amateurs who were not exactly pleasant to her. It's quite certain she can't be hungry."

As it happened, there was nobody but the attendant in the buffet when they reached it, and Lucy Davidson flung herself down with a curious, lithe gracefulness in a big chair in a corner.

"Bring me some coffee for the look of the thing," she said.

Tony did it, and then stood beside her while she toyed with her cup. Lucy Davidson was distinctly pretty in spite of her get up, but it was unpleasantly evident to her companion that she was not the girl he had flirted with. She seemed to have changed into a capable, determined woman, and there was something that suggested imperiousness in her dark eyes when she looked up at him.

"I want to know why you brought me here," he said.

The girl laughed. "That was n't civil, Tony. You should have let me think you came because you wanted to."

"I did n't," said Tony doggedly. "Nor can I stay here long. Don't you know that some of these people might recognize you?"

"I don't see why that should worry me, though I don't think they will. They are Darsley folk, and I fancy I have changed. You are going to be married I hear!"

Tony set his lips as he saw the mocking smile in his companion's face.

"Yes," he said. "We may as well talk plainly. You know of no reason why I should n't."

TONY IS PAINFULLY ASTONISHED

Lucy Davidson made a little reproachful gesture. "Tony," she said, "have I objected?"

"No. The question is, do you mean to?"

"That depends. I really don't want to cause you trouble. You see, I was fond of you once, Tony — and would you like me to tell you that I am still?"

Tony stood rigidly still with the blood in his forehead until the girl laughed.

"You need n't meet trouble before it comes," she said. "I only wanted to see you."

Again there was silence, until Tony, who felt he must say something, broke it.

"Where have you been since you left Northrop?" he asked.

"In London. Music-hall stage. I took there, and was in Melbourne, too. Just now I'm resting a little, and only came down here out of curiosity."

"Still," and Tony's voice trembled a little, "you will have heard —"

"Sit down," said the girl almost sharply. "I want to talk to you. Yes, I heard in Melbourne. I read it all in a Darsley paper, and thought what fools the folks were to blame Mr. Appleby."

Tony gasped. "It is a painful thing to talk about, and I don't want to distress you, but —"

Lucy Davidson looked at him steadily. "What I felt about it does n't concern anybody but myself. I told you they were fools, Tony. You and I know who it was that circumstances really pointed to."

Tony's cheeks turned a trifle gray, but this time he met her gaze. "Listen to me, Lucy. On my word of honor I had no hand in what happened," he said. "The solemn truth is that your father had an altercation with Appleby, and afterwards fell over the bridge."

The girl's eyes flashed, and she slowly straightened herself. "It is fortunate for you that I can take your word, because I had formed my own conclusions," she said. "Don't suppose I should sit here talking to you if I had thought you were guilty. This, however, is quite between ourselves."

There was a significance in the last words which was not lost upon the man. "Well," he said slowly, "we come back to the point again. What do you want from me?"

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"Just a little kindness. I was, I don't mind telling you again, fond of you, perhaps because — but we don't always give reasons, Tony. There is nothing I want to ask you for in the meanwhile."

"I am to be married soon," the man said in desperation.

Lucy Davidson rose with a curious mocking smile. "Well," she said, "I wish her joy of you. You are, you know, very poor stuff, Tony, and have n't nerve enough to make either a good man or a rascal. The last, at least now and then, gets something for his pains. Now, you may take me back again."

XVIII

NETTIE ASKS A QUESTION

NETTIE HARDING had spent at least six weeks at Low Wood when she sat one afternoon on the lawn, gazing before her reflectively, with a book turned upside-down upon her knee. She had at one time wondered why she lingered there, though she found the company of Hester Earle congenial, and Hester's father had pressed her to extend her visit, while other reasons that appeared more or less convincing had not been wanting. The Northrop valley was very pretty, and the quiet, well-ordered life her English friends led pleasant, as a change from the turmoil of commercial enterprise and the fierce activity of the search for pleasure she had been accustomed to in America. The tranquillity of the green, peaceful country appealed to her, and she found interesting the quietly spoken men and women who so decorously directed what was done in it, partly because the type was new to her.

That, however, was at the beginning, for by and by she was willing to admit that Northrop might grow wearisome if she saw too much of it, and she could no longer hide from herself the fact that she had a more cogent reason for dallying there. She felt, though as yet it appeared quite likely that she might be mistaken, she was picking up the threads of a drama, the plot of which had been imperfectly revealed to her. This in itself was interesting, for she had at least as much inquisitiveness as most of her sex, and she was sensible of a little thrill of pleasurable excitement when the scent grew hotter. Still, she never asked an indiscreet question, and waited with a patience that is not usually a characteristic of the women of her nation until she was certain.

Miss Wayne, she decided, was at least very like the woman Appleby had pictured to her; but she was difficult to understand, for Violet seldom displayed her feelings, and her cold

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

serenity baffled the observer. Tony Palliser, of whom she had contrived to see a good deal, was an easier and less interesting study. Nettie was naively witty, and could assume American mannerisms with excellent effect when she chose, while Tony was fond of being amused, and Violet Wayne apparently devoid of any small jealousy. Thus he spent a good deal of time hanging about Miss Harding, and would have been painfully astonished had he discovered what she thought of him. Languid good nature and the faculty of idling time away very gracefully did not appeal to her, for even pleasure is pursued with grim strenuousness in her country. He was, she fancied, just such a man as the one Appleby had sacrificed himself for; but she surmised that there were a good many men of that kind in England, and Appleby had told his story in a fashion that made the identification of the scene and the persons concerned in it difficult. Nettie felt also that should conviction be forced upon her she would still have to decide what her course would be.

She felt for Appleby a quiet esteem and a kindness which just stopped short of tenderness. She was an American, and could hold her own with most men in the art of flirtation, but she was also capable of a camaraderie that was characterized by frank sincerity and untainted by any affectation of love-making for one of the opposite sex. That being so, she felt it was incumbent upon her to discharge the obligation she owed him if opportunity afforded, though she knew that the indiscreet meddler not infrequently involves in disaster those she would benefit. By and by there was a step behind her, and she saw Hester Earle regarding her with a twinkle in her eyes.

"If there had been anybody else to see you — Tony Palliser, for example — one could almost have fancied you had assumed that becomingly pensive pose," she said. "You would make a picture of ingenuous contemplation."

Nettie laughed. "Well," she said, "I feel very like a torpedo. Anyway, I didn't put it on, though I'm open to admit that there's quite a trace of the peacock about me."

"That is evidently American hyperbole," said Hester. "Talk English, Nettie. I don't understand."

She seated herself on the mossy wall close by, and noticed that her companion was meditatively watching two figures

NETTIE ASKS A QUESTION

approaching by a path through a wheatfield. They were just recognizable as Tony and Violet Wayne, and were evidently unaware of being observed, for the man stooped, and, plucking what appeared to be a poppy from among the corn, offered it to his companion. The pair stopped a moment, and the man seemed to be desirous of fastening it in the girl's dress.

"The peacock," said Nettie in the drawl she assumed only when it suited her, "is easy. They're vain, you know, and I wouldn't figure it was worth while to spread out my best tail before men like Tony Palliser. I'm quite fond of being looked at, too."

"One would fancy you could scarcely find fault with him on that account," said Hester dryly. "But the torpedo?"

"That's a little harder. I suppose you never felt as if you were full of explosives, and could go off when you wanted and scatter destruction around. A torpedo does n't appear a very terrible thing, you know. It's nice and round and shiny. I've seen one. Julian showed it me."

"Nobody goes off in England — at least not among the people we care to mix with," said Hester. "We send those who seem inclined to behave in that fashion out to the colonies or America. People appear to rather like explosions there."

"Still, you must get a little shake up now and then. Did nothing startling and unexpected ever happen at Northrop?"

Hester Earle was English, and proud of the decorous tranquillity of the life she led. "No," she said. "That is, nothing really worth mentioning. Where did you get charged with explosives, Nettie?"

Nettie felt that one of the stoutest threads she had laid her fingers upon had snapped in a most unexpected manner, but she had observed the British character, and was not quite convinced. It was, she reflected, after all a question of what Hester Earle considered worthy of mention.

"In Cuba," she said. "Now, I was worrying about something, and because you are one of those quiet persons who think a good deal I'd like your opinion. Suppose you or somebody else had a friend who was in trouble through other people's fault, and would not say a word to clear himself, and you found how you could make things straight for him? The answer to that seems easy, but it gets complicated by the fact

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

that to do it you would have to stir up no end of mud and startle quite a few nice easy-going people."

"Speaking generally, I should leave the mud alone, and feel that the friend knew best. After all, he may have been to blame."

"No," said Nettie. "The man I was thinking of never did a mean thing in his life."

"Then you can ask Violet Wayne. She is even quieter than I am, and I believe she thinks a good deal."

Tony and his companion joined them then, and Violet took her place beside Nettie, while the man sat down on the smooth strip of turf that sloped to the sunken tennis lawn.

"You seem to have been discussing something serious," he said.

"Yes," said Hester. "Nettie has been comparing herself with a torpedo, and wished to know whether it would be desirable for her to go off or not. I recommended her to submit the case to Violet. Hadn't you better begin, Nettie? You rather like an audience."

Nettie was seldom abashed, and the position appealed to her. She had only vague surmises to go upon, and one of the clues had snapped, but the rest might hold, while such an opportunity of discovering the sentiments of the woman who might prove to be most involved could scarcely occur again. It was accordingly with a little thrill of excitement she put the question a trifle more concisely than she had done to Hester, and though she smiled at the others, watched Tony closely. He was certainly astonished, though the case was so outlined that it could scarcely be identified with his own; but his indolent carelessness stood him in good stead, and he sat still, listening with no great show of interest until Nettie concluded.

"Of course, what I have told you concerns somebody in Cuba and not England," she said. "Now, the point is, would it be better to leave the people alone who seem quite content with everything as it is? One of them would be hurt considerably if the truth came out!"

There was a little silence, and once more Violet Wayne was sensible of the vague apprehension which had troubled her more frequently of late, but she met Nettie's inquiring glance with steady eyes.

NETTIE ASKS A QUESTION

"Still, I think it would be better for that person to know the truth," she said.

"I am not quite sure," said Hester reflectively. "We will surmise that he or she is happy in the deception, and it would last all her life. In that case would it be a kindness to undeceive her?"

"I think so. If, as you seem to assume, the person were a woman she would probably discover the truth herself. Deceptions seldom continue, and if the awakening must come it would come better sooner than later."

Nettie was watching Tony, who lay now endeavoring to pluck a daisy out of the turf. The task seemed to occupy all his attention. "You have n't decided yet?" she said.

Tony assumed an attitude of languid reflection, though it was evident to Nettie that his fingers, stained a little with the soil, were not quite steady. He may have realized this, for he rubbed them in the grass with slow deliberation.

"Well," he said, "it seems to me that if one is dreaming something very nice it would be better to let him sleep as long as possible, and a blunder to waken him to unpleasant realities. There's another point, too. You seem to have overlooked the person who did the wrong."

"I don't think I mentioned that there was one!"

"Still, you led us to believe that wrong had been done. That, of course, implies that somebody must have perpetrated it, and I expect you will think me warranted in assuming it was a man. Well, you see, he may n't have meant to do any harm at all, and be sincerely sorry. Would n't he deserve a little consideration? People are forced into doing a thing they don't want to now and then."

Nettie watched him thoughtfully. Tony's face was indifferent, but she fancied that he, at least, desired to convince himself.

"Tony's question is unnecessary," said Violet Wayne. "If the man were sincerely sorry there would be an end of the difficulty. He would put it straight by making reparation."

"He might find it difficult," said Hester.

Tony seemed to wince, and once more turned his attention to the daisy, but when the rest sat silent he glanced at Violet.

"I rather think we are getting away from the point, but since you seem to expect it I'll take up that man's brief," he

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

said. "Well, we will assume that he is a well-intentioned person who has only slipped up once, and is trying to make up for what he has done. Now, if he were left alone, such a man might go straight all the rest of his life."

"That's specious, but distinctly unorthodox," said Hester. "Who had those beautifully illuminated tables of the law put up in Northrop church, Tony?"

Nettie laughed to conceal her interest. "But John P. Robinson, he says they didn't know everything down in Judee. That's latter day American, but it's what a good many people seem to think. Please go on, Mr. Palliser."

"I can't go very far. Still, we'll try to picture such a man giving liberally where it's wanted, going straight, and doing what good he can all round. We'll say the lives of other people who believe in him are bound up in his, and their happiness depends upon his holding their confidence. Now, would it be a kindness to anybody to bring everything down crashing about his head?"

He stopped, and glanced with a curious half-veiled appeal in his eyes at Violet, but she shook her head, and the gravity Nettie had once or twice wondered at crept into her face. It showed perfect in its contour and modelling under the big hat, but its clear pallor was more noticeable just then, and it seemed to Nettie very cold. Then she smiled faintly.

"It is a very old question. Can a man be pardoned and retain the offence? Still, I think it was answered decisively," she said.

Tony said nothing, and, as none of the others appeared inclined to talk, the stillness of the afternoon made itself felt. The pale yellow sunshine lay hot upon the lawn, and the soft murmur of the river came up across the corn, which, broken by dusky woodlands steeped in slumbrous shadow and meadow no longer green, rolled back in waves of ruddy bronze into the valley. Beyond it the hillsides, narrowing in, faded blurred and dim into the hazy distance. Still, the eyes of Tony and Violet Wayne were fixed upon the raw blotch of brickwork rising against the green woods above a flashing pool of the river. The rushy meadows and barren hillside environing it were now worth the best plough land on the Northrop estate, and, as both of those who looked at them remembered then, they had been intended as Appleby's inheritance.

NETTIE ASKS A QUESTION

It was Hester who broke the silence. "Your question has been answered, Nettie," she said. "It is decided that the person who did the wrong is the one to right it; and now we'll change the topic. The entertainment we had at Darsley was, as you know, an immense success, so great, indeed, that as we still want money we have decided to have another."

"Still, it seems to me you can't consistently inflict any more tickets on the Darsley tradesmen," said Tony, who appeared desirous of concealing his relief. "The fact is, I was rather sorry for one or two of them. Rawley told me he had to buy at least two half-crown tickets from each of his leading supporters. I don't think it would be decent to bleed them any more."

Hester laughed. "That difficulty has been provided for, and I told everybody that I sent tickets to that it would be conducive to success if when they broached the subject they paid their bills. This time we intend to put the screw on our friends. You see, it is some time since we had any little relaxation among ourselves."

"A concert is n't really very amusing," said Tony. "Anyway, not when you have to sing at it."

"That depends. This one will be; and since it is n't exactly a concert it will have the virtue of novelty. We intend to hold it here by moonlight and limelight on the lawn. The tickets will be invitation ones at half-a-guinea."

"Where will you get your limelights from? I believe that kind of thing costs a good deal," said Tony.

"I don't know. The privilege of being allowed to supply them has been allotted to Mr. Anthony Palliser. He is also put down for a song."

Tony made a gesture of resignation. "It will most likely rain."

"Still, the tickets will have been sold, and if it does rain the people who can't get into the big billiard room can sit out in couples in the hall, which will probably please them just as well. We, however, mean to have it outside if we can. We want the limelights for the tableaux and costume dancing."

"Who have you got to dance?" said Tony with evident concern.

"Miss Clavier — the young woman who pleased everybody

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

that night at Darsley. The vicar does n't mind. Have you very strong objections to skirt dancing, Tony?"

"No," said Tony slowly, and Nettie fancied his voice was a trifle strained. "Of course I have n't. Still, you must not depend too much on me. I mean I 'll get the limelights, and buy as many tickets as can be reasonably expected of me, but whether I 'll be there or not is another affair. I have to go up to London now and then, you see."

The last was so evidently an inspiration that Hester laughed as she glanced at him. "We will contrive to fix a night that will suit you," she said. "I fancy you had better submit quietly, Tony."

Tony murmured something which was not wholly flattering to the promoters of such entertainments, and when he and Violet Wayne took their leave Hester glanced at Nettie.

"I wonder why Tony is anxious not to meet Miss Clavier again," she said.

As it happened, Nettie was asking herself the same question, but she decided that there was nothing to be gained by mentioning it.

"The girl who dances! You think he did n't want to meet her?" she said.

"Of course! He showed it. Everybody can tell what Tony is thinking. He is almost painfully transparent."

"Well," said Nettie slowly, "I don't quite know. I have come across other men like him and found that they take one in. You fancy you can look right through them, and yet you see very little of what is inside them."

"The trouble is that there is nothing in Tony except good nature," said Hester.

Nettie appeared reflective, and once more expressed herself in the same fashion. "I don't quite know. Still, I hope you are right," she said. "You see, I 'm quite fond of Violet Wayne."

XIX

POSITIVE PROOF

HESTER EARLE'S entertainment promised to prove as successful as the other had been, for a clear moon hung low above the hillside when Tony drove Violet Wayne and her mother to Low Wood down the Northrop valley. The night was pleasantly warm, and the murmur of the river which slid in and out of the mist wisps in the hollow beneath the white road rose faintly musical out of the silence. Beyond the long hedgerows the stubble lay steeped in silvery light save where the long shadows lay black as ebony in the wake of the gleaming sheaves. A smell of honeysuckle drifted out from the blackness of a coppice they flitted through, and Tony turned with a little laugh to the girl beside him, while the clip-clop of the hoofs rang amidst the trees.

"I wonder if you and I are thinking of the same thing," he said. "It happened just about this hour a year ago, and it was such another night."

His voice had a faint thrill in it, and Violet laughed softly as she glanced at her left hand.

"You were horribly nervous that evening, Tony," she said. "I don't think I ever mentioned it, but when you put the ring on it scarred my finger. That might have had a significance with superstitious people."

Tony glanced over his shoulder, and saw that Mrs. Wayne, who sat behind them, was apparently interested in something her companion was saying.

"I think that was quite natural," he said lightly. "You see, the situation was disconcertingly novel to me."

"So you told me!" said the girl with a little laugh. "If I remember, you laid some stress upon the fact. It was also a proof of my credulity that I believed you."

It was one of Tony's disadvantages that he was now and then unduly sensitive, for the deception he had been guilty of

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

on the night in question was by comparison trifling. Still, he remembered with unpleasant distinctness another incident of a somewhat similar description, in which it was a little brooch that figured and not an engagement ring, and the red lips he had stooped to were not those of Violet Wayne. Tony could recall their tempting curve, and the gleam in the dark eyes that met his own, as well as the little lodge garden that was very still and shady that drowsy afternoon. It was perhaps the memory of it which made him flick the horse viciously with the whip. Then he felt that his companion's eyes were fixed upon him.

"The brute is afraid of shadows," he said.

Violet turned her eyes on him, and there was a curious little smile in them. "I wonder if the complaint is infectious. He goes steadily with me," she said. "Tony, you have n't the hands you had."

Tony flushed visibly, for the moonlight was on his face now they had left the copse behind, and he remembered what had passed between him and the girl in a room at Northrop the night Godfrey Palliser died.

"Well," he said a trifle dryly, "if you are right it's due to worry, which, as everybody knows, never did agree with me. While agricultural property brings in what it does just now, keeping everything straight at Northrop is n't quite so easy as some folks seem to fancy."

"Still, the sale of that land to the electrical company and the ground rent you are getting from the other concern should simplify it," said the girl.

"You can't quite understand these affairs"; and Tony, who raised the whip, let it drop again.

Violet once more looked at him steadily, and her voice was low as she said, "If they were explained to me I think I could, but we will let that pass. What you said a little while ago reminds me of the weeks that followed the night you put that ring on. You had more cause for anxiety — and yet we had no cares then."

"No," said Tony. "I will remember those weeks while I live. Nothing could take them away from me."

"And now there is a difference! A little shadow that dims the brightness. Tony, you feel it, too?"

The man, who did not answer, laid both hands on the reins,

POSITIVE PROOF

for, and he recognized the significance of it, they swung round a bend of the road into sight of Appleby's inheritance just then. A pile of harsh brickwork rose in front of them, jarring upon the harmonies of the night; there was a ringing of hammers, and their eyes were dazzled by the glare of a great light under which a swarm of bent black figures were toiling. The horse broke into a gallop, the dog-cart jolted furiously, and for five anxious minutes Tony, who set his lips, dragged at the reins. Then, as the startled beast was forced into a trot again, he laughed petulantly.

"You are a little fanciful, Violet," he said. "I have not been quite up to my usual form lately, and singing at these confounded concerts worries me. Hester will keep me busy, too, and I shall scarcely get a moment near you."

Now Violet Wayne was seldom troubled by trifling jealousies, but she was a little anxious about Tony, and watched him as she said, "Your duties seemed to consist in entertaining Miss Clavier on the last occasion!"

The color showed in Tony's forehead, but it was the vague apprehension in his face that astonished his companion, who noticed the sudden tightening of his fingers on the reins. Still, the only answer she caught was an indistinct "Confound the woman!"

Violet made no comment, for she had noticed already that the anxieties Tony had evidently decided on concealing from her were affecting his temper, and when five minutes later they rattled up the Low Wood avenue there was no longer any opportunity for questions. Tony had contrived to arrive just as the entertainment was commencing, and Hester Earle promptly despatched him to the performers' room.

The long windows were wide open, and the soft night air flowed in with the faint scent of flowers, and a murmur of voices from the specially invited audience Miss Earle had bestowed in the tennis green, which was sunk a few feet on one side below the level of the sweep of lawn. Tennis was not a game she was fond of, and she had pacified the gardener by placing the chair legs on boards. Tony could see the shadowy mass of humanity showing black against a dazzling glare, for the big oxyhydrogen lights he had provided were then blazing in front of the proscenium, which had been extemporized on the verge of the higher level. The path that led to it

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

wound along the edge of a tall shrubbery where colored lights blinked here and there amidst the dusky leaves.

He was never certain afterwards as to whom he talked with or what he said, though he surmised that his observations had not been especially apposite, for some of those about him appeared a trifle astonished, and two of them laughed. Tony was somewhat apt to lose his head when brought face to face with a difficulty, and the fact that Lucy Davidson was sitting a few yards away disconcerted him. A glance at his programme showed him that she was to figure in two pieces of mimicry instead of dancing, and she was dressed simply and tastefully, but while the room was crowded there were only two very young men in her vicinity, and that fact with something in their laughter seemed to differentiate their companion from the rest of the company. Tony, however, fancied that they were favored with scanty encouragement from the girl. She looked at him once, but Tony turned his head away, and it was not until he was about to go out that he felt himself compelled to speak to her.

"The others will take a lead from you, and those young asses are only making the thing more unpleasant for the girl," said a man he was talking to.

Tony said nothing. He could think of no excuse, but remembering what Violet had mentioned he shrank from the encounter. The good-natured committee-man's meaning had been perfectly plain to him, and he knew that he could save the girl the unpleasantness of being met with chilly aloofness or undue familiarity. His disposition was also a kindly one, and the decision that she must be left to fight her own battles caused him a little flush of confusion. As it happened, she saw it, and a portentous sparkle showed in her dark eyes. Tony noticed this, and remembered that weak complaisance had once placed him under the thumb of keeper Davidson. He did not mean to repeat the blunder, and his fears made him slightly venomous.

"I think you have met Mr. Anthony Palliser already, Miss Clavier," said his companion.

Tony knew that every eye in the room was upon him, and that his words would not be lost, but he felt he could not afford to be gracious, and while he hesitated the girl rose up and made him a little curtsey with quiet ironical insolence.

POSITIVE PROOF

"I have had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Palliser — once or twice," she said in a voice that was intended to reach the rest.

Tony stood still a moment fingering his watch chain, and looking down at her with something his masculine companion had never seen there before in his face. It almost suggested vindictive cruelty, but he murmured a conventional word or two that was scarcely audible, and passed on with the slightest of inclinations. There was also a little silence when he went out, and the color faded a trifle in Miss Clavier's face, leaving her cheeks alone red, while a gleam that implied a good deal crept into her eyes.

Tony, however, sang brilliantly when his turn came a few minutes later. He had at last made a decided stand, and felt a trifle exhilarated by the novelty of it. Still, he was without stability, and it was much against his wishes that, wandering about between the songs after spending some time with Nettie Harding, he met Miss Clavier again. He had just seated himself upon the sloping bank of turf not far from the stage when he became aware that a seat above him was occupied, and glancing round at a sound saw the girl looking down on him. Then he would have turned away, but she stopped him with a little derisive laugh.

"Get up, Tony, and come and sit beside me," she said.

Tony rose, but noticing that one or two colored lights which hung from the branches of a copper beech above them rendered the seat visible stood still.

"To be frank, I would sooner be excused," he said. "After the little exhibition in the green-room it's a trifle difficult to understand why you want me."

"You deserved it! A word or two would n't have cost you anything, and I wanted you to keep those boys away."

"One would have fancied that you were quite capable of fighting your own battles."

The girl made a curious little gesture. "I think you are taking the wrong way," she said. "Now I don't want very much from you to-night, but I don't like being left out in the cold. You see, I am not accustomed to it, and you could have made this evening a good deal pleasanter to me."

She, however, blundered when she said to-night. Tony's fears had made him brutal, and it is the terror of the unknown

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

that grows most oppressive. He did not know what she wanted, and it had unfortunately never dawned on him that she might, after all, want very little, and have had no hand in Davidson's scheme of extortion.

"Your meaning is tolerably plain, but I have been under the screw once," he said. "Now, I don't wish to rake up anything that would be painful, but you know just as well as I do that if I posed as an old friend of yours it would strengthen your hand. You will excuse me putting it plainly, but that is just what I don't intend to do."

A curious faint smile flickered into his companion's eyes. "It's unfortunate you have n't a little more sense," she said. "When you should be obstinate you are soft, and when a pleasant word or two would pay you well you bully. Has it ever struck you that I may n't be — what you evidently think I am — or have any designs on you?"

Tony still went the wrong way, for it seemed to him that a resolute attitude would at least tend to moderate any claim the girl might contemplate making. "I don't think I ever worried about the question," he said. "You see, it's necessary to be quite frank, and it really was n't of any importance to me."

"Well, I don't want to argue," and Miss Clavier laughed. "You told me you were going to be married, but you did n't tell me who to. Of course, I could find out, but you should feel a little easier when you hear that I have n't tried to."

Tony did not believe her, and she recognized it. "I was once driven too hard, but this time I'll fight," he said. "Anything you might feel tempted to do to annoy me would most certainly recoil upon yourself."

"That really is n't necessary, Tony. Well, one could make a guess. It is the very pretty girl with the blue eyes I saw you talking to. An American, too. They're generally rich, and, of course, you must have money!"

Tony seized the opportunity of at least starting her on the wrong track. "Money," he said chillingly, "would be a very small recommendation in Miss Harding's case."

"Yes," said his companion, "I daresay it would. She saw I was lonely, and I think meant to be kind, because she came up and spoke to me. Don't you think it's my duty to give her a hint after that?"

POSITIVE PROOF

"I am not going to stay to be baited," and Tony slowly straightened himself. "I shall have pleasure in leaving you to your youthful admirers. I see them coming."

He swung round upon his heel, and Miss Clavier braced herself for an effort, as the result of which the two condescending youths retreated somewhat precipitately with flushed faces. Then she did a thing that would have astonished Tony, for she leaned back in the garden seat and with an abrupt movement passed her handkerchief across her eyes. It was a moment or two later when, looking up at the sound of a脚步声, she saw Nettie Harding gravely regarding her, and to her vexation as well as astonishment felt the blood tingle in her cheeks.

"Yes," said Nettie quietly. "I heard what you told them. They deserved it, and you did it very well. Now, I've been talking about nothing for most of two hours, and this place seems nice and quiet. You don't mind my sitting here with you a little?"

Nettie Harding's directness was usually assumed, because she found it convenient in England when she had anything delicate to do, and Miss Clavier, who read sympathy in her face, was grateful to her. She also hoped her companion would not notice the moisture on her long dark lashes.

"I am paid for coming here, you understand?" she said. "I dance and mimic people on the stage."

"Of course!" said Nettie. "Well, my father once peddled oranges on the trains; and they make quite a fuss over people who are on the stage in London, while I don't think many of them could have done that last piece of yours half as cunningly. Anyway, I have n't laughed as much since I've been in England. If you did it in New York you'd coin money."

She sat down smiling, and Miss Clavier regarded her out of half-closed eyes. There was nobody very near them, and only two dim colored lights above their heads. Somebody was singing, and a sweet tenor voice floated away into the stillness of the moonlit night. Miss Clavier glanced swiftly round into the shadows of the copper beech that fell blackly athwart the seat.

"You like frankness in your country," she said. "Now I am, perhaps, going to offend you, but I don't mind if I do. I

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

saw you talking a good deal to Mr. Tony Palliser at Darsley, and here to-night."

Nettie contrived to hide her astonishment, but she felt that another thread was being placed in her hand.

"Well," she said, "American young women are permitted to talk to gilt-edge Englishmen, and even to marry them now and then. It really is n't astonishing."

"No," said her companion. "Still, it would be a blunder for an American girl who had n't seen many Englishmen to marry Tony Palliser."

Nettie felt a thrill of pleasurable excitement, and her little show of anger was very well assumed.

"Are you quite sure you ought to talk to me like that?" she said.

"Yes. You will understand what I mean when I tell you that I was Lucy Davidson. I fancied some of the people here would have recognized me, but it seems they have n't."

"Oh!" said Nettie sharply, and sat still, wondering what meaning she was to attach to this since she had never heard of Lucy Davidson, until her companion leaned forward a trifle.

"I have told nobody else, but it was not Bernard Appleby who came to meet me at Northrop lodge," she said.

Nettie's gasp of astonishment was perfectly genuine this time, for though the story Appleby had told her had been very vague in respect to the part played by Lucy Davidson she had been able to supply the deficiencies in it, and she was sure of her companion now.

"And you let them think — how could you?" she said with flashing eyes.

Miss Clavier was evidently almost as astonished as her listener, but she had committed herself.

"It was too late to do any good by speaking when I heard they suspected him — and I was just a little fond of Tony once," she said. "Of course, he was n't worth it — he never was — and that's why I tried to warn you. You made me feel you wanted to be kind to me."

Nettie laughed a little, almost scornfully. "Now, I don't know if that was nice of you. If you only meant to punish Mr. Palliser it was n't."

Miss Clavier's face was faintly flushed all over now, but she regarded her companion steadily. "I don't quite know why

POSITIVE PROOF

I did it — but it was n't altogether to make Tony smart," she said. "It was, at least, a little because I seemed to feel you were too good for him. Oh, I know I have done a good deal of harm — and it 's a change to do the other thing now and then. I don't want Tony. Any one can have him and welcome — they 'll get a very poor bargain, and I would n't like you to think I meant to pluck him — though that would have been easy."

"No," said Nettie, "I did not think that of you. What did you mean to do with him?"

"I don't know. To amuse myself by watching him wriggle, I think. It was nice to feel I could frighten him horribly. If you had been like the rest, and he had only shown me a little kindness, I fancy I would have let him go. But he could n't do the right thing if it would cost him a trifle — he has n't it in him; and he made me believe you meant to marry him."

"No," said Nettie, with a faint ring in her voice. "The man I 'm going to marry is worth — several hundred Tony Pallisers. Still, I 'm glad you told me, and you 'll tell me the rest of the story."

Miss Clavier sat still for at least a minute, and then obeying an impulse told her tale. Her voice was also a little strained as she said, "Clavier was bad — bad all through — and he left me before he died in Melbourne; but though my father never knew it I was married to him all the time. I found the — 'Madame' — a disadvantage."

Then there was silence until a burst of applause greeted the conclusion of the song; and while the two sat in the shadows Nettie Harding laid her hand sympathetically on her companion's arm.

XX

FOUND GUILTY

TWO or three weeks had passed since the concert on the Low Wood lawn, and Thérèse Clavier had gone back into the obscurity she came from, when Nettie Harding once more stood beside the effigy in Northrop church. It was then late in the afternoon, and the little ancient building was growing shadowy. Hester Earle and Violet Wayne were moving about the aisle with bundles of wheat-ears and streamers of ivy, for the harvest thanksgiving was shortly to be celebrated, while the vicar stood waiting their directions on the chancel steps with a great handful of crimson gladioli.

Nettie, however, noticed none of them. She was lost in reflection, and her eyes were fixed on the grim stone face. She had gazed at it often with a vague sense of comprehension and a feeling that the contemplation of it brought within her grasp the spirit of the chivalrous past. Loyalty, she felt, was the predominative motive in the sculptured face, though it bore the stamp of stress and weariness; and she stood very still struggling with a half-formed resolution as she gazed at it.

Hester's voice rose softly from the aisle, and there was a patter of feet and swish of draperies, but it was low, as though the girl who made it felt the silence of the place. The door beside the organ was open wide, and Nettie could hear a faint rustle of moving leaves, and the sighing of a little warm wind about the church, while, lifting her head, she caught a brief glimpse of the dusky beech woods and sunlit valley. It was all very still, impressively quiet, and she felt the peace of it; but it was not peace, but something born of strife and yet akin to it her fancy strained after, and once more she seemed to hear the strident crackle of riflery and the shouts of the Sin Verguenza. The green English valley faded, and she saw in place of it the white walls of the Cuban town rise against the dusky indigo. Then once more she could dimly realize the calm that came of a high purpose, and was beyond and greater

FOUND GUILTY

than the peace of prosperity. She had seen it beneath the stress and weariness in the faces of the marble knight and a living man.

Then with a little swift move of her shoulders she shook off the fancies, and fell to considering the task which it seemed was laid before her. She had made a friend of Bernard Appleby and that meant much with her; while ever since she had heard Miss Clavier's story the desire to right him had been growing stronger, but she had unpleasant misgivings. She felt the responsibility of breaking the smooth course of other lives almost too great for her, and wondered vaguely whether if she declared the truth in that sheltered land where nothing that was startling or indecorous ever seemed to happen anybody would believe her. She might even have kept silent had Violet Wayne been different, but Nettie already entertained an affection that was largely respectful for her, and determined that if she married Tony Palliser she should at least do so knowing what kind of man he was. Once more, however, her resolution almost failed her, and she glanced at the great glittering angel in the west window with a sense of her presumption in venturing to meddle with the great scheme of destiny. Still, Nettie was daring, and turning suddenly she looked down into the stone face again.

"I think you would understand, and at least you would not be afraid. Well, the man who is very like you shall have his rights," she said.

The stillness seemed to grow more intense, the calm face more resolute, while the spirit of the dead sculptor's conception gripped the girl as it had never done before. She felt that her duty was plain before her, and that fears and misgivings must be trampled on. Then there was a step behind her, and she saw Hester looking at her with a little smile.

"Were you talking to the effigy, Nettie?" she said.

"Yes," said Nettie quietly. "I think I was. There is no reason you should n't laugh if you want to, but I seem to fancy that man understands me. What you will not believe, however, is that he answered me."

Hester appeared a trifle astonished, but she smiled again. "I saw you turn and look at the figure in the west window," she said. "Were you holding communion with the angel too?"

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"No," said Nettie with a curious naive gravity. "I'm quite open to admit I don't know much about angels—I've only seen pictures of them. Still, I sometimes think there's a little of their nature in the hearts of men. That man must have had it, and the Palliser who was killed in Africa had it too. Of course, that's not the kind of talk you would expect from an American."

Hester realized by the last trace of irony that Nettie did not desire to pursue the topic, and looking round saw that the vicar had joined them unobserved. He was a quiet man with an ascetic face, but there was a little twinkle in his eyes.

"Yes," he said. "I admit I overheard. It seems to me that Miss Harding's attitude is perfectly comprehensible."

Hester laughed. "That," she said, "is convincing, coming from you. In the meanwhile I am positively thirsty, and tea will be waiting at Low Wood. You may as well come over with us now since we expect you at dinner."

It was, however, half an hour later when they left the rectory and walked through the fields to Low Wood with Tony, who had been waiting them. Nettie laughed and talked to the vicar with her usual freedom, but she was also sensible of a quiet resolution. Violet Wayne should know the truth and Appleby's name be cleared, but she was shrewd, and saw the difficulty of attesting it convincingly. She was also very fair, and decided that Tony must have an opportunity of defending himself or admitting his offence. Now and then she felt her heart throbbing as she wondered whether she would fail at her task, but she shook off her misgivings, and it was only afterwards the vicar guessed at the struggle that went on within his companion.

They were sitting about the little table on the lawn when an opportunity was made for her, and the scene long remained impressed on Nettie's memory. The old house showed cool and gray between its wrappings of creepers that were flecked with saffron now, while here and there a tendril gleamed warm crimson against the stone. Its long shadow lay black upon the velvet grass, and there were ruddy gleams from the woodlands from which the yellow light was fading beyond the moss-crusted wall. Still, the river shone dazzlingly where it came rippling out of the gloom of a copse, and a long row of windows blinked in the building beside its bank.

FOUND GUILTY.

Nettie noticed this vacantly, for it was Tony and Violet Wayne she was looking at. The man lay with a curious languid gracefulness in his chair, his straw hat on the back of his head and a smile on his lips, though Nettie fancied that she saw care in his face. Violet sat erect looking down the valley with thoughtful eyes, and though every line of her figure suggested quiet composure it seemed to Nettie that her face was a trifle too colorless, and that her big gray eyes lacked brightness. She could almost fancy that the shadow of care which rested on Tony had touched his sweetheart too. Opposite them sat the vicar, who had, Nettie understood, been a close friend of the Pallisers, and Hester Earle was busy with her spirit kettle close beside him. The latter looked up suddenly.

"I can't help thinking that the Americans are a somewhat inconsistent people," she said. "It is only a little while since Nettie fancied herself a torpedo, and yet I found her explaining her sentiments to the marble knight this afternoon."

"Well," said Nettie with a little smile, though she could feel her heart beating, "I feel more like a torpedo than ever just now."

Hester nodded. "That is more or less comprehensible," she said. "A torpedo is an essentially modern thing stored with potential activities and likely to go off and startle everybody when they least expect it, all of which is characteristically American. The marble knight—and I fancy some people would include the angel—belongs to the past, to the old knightly days when women were worshipped, men believed in saints and guardian angels, and faith wrought miracles."

The vicar glanced at Nettie as he said, "Extremes meet now and then."

"Well," said Nettie, "women are made much of in my country still, even by impecunious Englishmen who claim descent from men who did their share in those days of chivalry. That is, when they have money enough, but just now I'm not going to be too prickly. You have n't much voice, Hester, but you sing that little jingly song about the fairies quite prettily, and the notion it's hung upon gets hold of me. I can feel it better in Northrop church than anywhere. You know what I mean. There is very little to keep us out of

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

fairyland. You have but to touch with your finger tips the ivory gate and golden!"

"If Hester understands your meaning I admit that it's more than I do," said Tony.

"Still," said Nettie naively, "I didn't think you would. You have too many possessions, and, you see, there are limitations in the song. You might knock a long while at those ivory gates before they let you in."

There was a little laughter, in which Tony joined, and the vicar said, "Excellent! He deserved it. Please don't stop, Miss Harding."

"That's not necessary," said Hester. "Once Nettie gets started she generally, as she would express it, goes straight through."

"Yes," said Nettie, "I quite often do. I'm not in the least afraid, like you, of being thought sentimental. In fact, we are fond of telling people what we think in my country. Still, I'm not sure about those limitations. The gates should open to everybody, even business men and heiresses — but I don't want to go trespassing while the vicar's here."

The vicar nodded. "I claim you as an ally," he said. "The idea you have taken up is not, however, exactly a novel one."

"Well," said Nettie, "what I feel is this. The old loyal spirit is living still — because it belongs to all time and can never die. It's with us now in these days of steam engines and magazine rifles. Those old-time men wore their labels — the monk's girdle, the red-cross shield, the palmer's shell, and some, according to the pictures, the nimbus too; but can't modern men, even those who play poker, which is a game of nerve as well as chance, and smoke green cigars, be as good as they? Now, I don't like a man to be ostensibly puritanical and ascetic — unless, of course, he's a clergyman."

There was a little laughter, and the vicar shook his head. "I'm afraid they don't all come under that category," he said.

"Still, there are men who never did a mean thing or counted the cost when they saw what was expected of them. Can't one fancy their passing the gates of that fairyland the easier because they are stained with the dust of the strife, and reaching out towards communion with the spirits of those old

FOUND GUILTY

loyal folk who went before them — they, and the women they believe in?"

There was a moment's silence. Nettie's face was a trifle flushed, and a faint gleam showed in Violet Wayne's gray eyes.

"I think," said the vicar reflectively, "you might go further and say — with all angels and archangels! We will take it that fairyland is only a symbol."

Tony, however, laughed indolently. "One would feel tempted to wonder whether there are many men who never did a mean thing."

A curious anger came upon Nettie. Tony Palliser seemed the embodiment of all that her simple strenuous nature despised, and he who had everything had taken from a better man the blameless name which was his one possession. He sat before her honored and prosperous, while she remembered Appleby's weariness and rags, and obeyed the impulse that drove her to unmask him. Her answer was coldly incisive.

"There are. You know one of them," she said.

"No," said Tony, and there was a trace of anxiety in his glance, "I am not sure that I do, though I have some passable friends."

"Well," said Nettie, "I certainly met one, and he did not wear a label. In fact, he was a smuggler of rifles and a leader of the Shameless Legion, but he was very loyal to his comrades, and when he was wounded and weary with battle he risked and lost a good deal to take care of a woman who had no claim on him. She had, he felt, been committed to his trust, and he would have been torn to pieces before he failed in it. That was why the knight's face reminded me of his — but I have told you about him already."

Tony's face expressed relief, and Nettie sat silent a moment until the vicar said, "It was a generous impulse, but it may have been a momentary one, while in the crusader's case there must have been a sustaining purpose, and a great abnegation, a leaving of lands and possessions he might never regain."

Nettie realized that her task must be undertaken now, and wondered that she felt so quietly and almost mercilessly collected.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"Still," she said, "the man I mentioned did as much—not to win fame or a pardon for his sins, but to save a comrade who was not worthy of the sacrifice. You would like me to tell you about it?"

Hester smiled in languid approbation, and the vicar's face showed his interest; but Tony sat very still, with the fingers of one hand quivering a little, and Violet's eyes seemed curiously grave as she fixed them upon the girl.

"Then," said Nettie, "I will try, though it is n't exactly a pleasant story. There was a man in England who involved himself with a girl whom, because of your notions in this country, he could not marry. It was only a flirtation, but the girl's father made the most of it, and raised trouble for the man when he wanted to marry a woman of his own degree. He had done nothing wrong as yet, but he was weak—so he sent his friend to bluff off the man who had been squeezing money out of him."

Tony made a little abrupt movement, and a tinge of gray showed in his cheek, but it passed unnoticed by all save Nettie Harding. The vicar was watching her with a curious intentness, and there was apprehension in Violet's face, while Hester gazed steadily at Nettie with growing astonishment.

"It was at night the friend met the blackmailer," she said. "There was an altercation, and then a struggle. Still, the blackmailer was not seriously hurt, and the other man saw him walk away. It was not until next day they found he had fallen into a river from the bridge."

She stopped a moment, and Violet turned to her, very white in face, with a great horror in her eyes.

"You venture to tell me this?" she said.

"Yes," said Nettie, glancing at Tony. "It hurts me, but it's necessary. If you do not believe me ask the man who sent his friend to meet the man he dared not face."

There was a sound that suggested a gasp, and a dress rustled softly as Violet, moving a little, closed one hand, while Tony's face showed gray and drawn as he leaned forward in his chair. It was, however, the vicar who broke the tense silence.

"Since you have told us so much, Miss Harding, I must ask you to go on," he said.

"Then," said Nettie, "the friend gave up everything, and

FOUND GUILTY

took the blame that his comrade might marry the woman he loved. He went to America — and when he comes back there from Cuba we will find room for him."

"I think," said the vicar very slowly, "in order to make quite sure one of us should ask you for his name."

Nettie glanced at Violet, who made a little sign.

"It was Bernard Appleby," she said.

Then Violet turned to Tony, and her voice, which was low and strained, sent a little thrill through the listeners.

"Speak!" she said. "Tony, you can, you must, controvert it!"

Tony rose very slowly to his feet, and the courage of desperation was his. "I can't. Miss Harding is quite correct," he said. "I must ask the rest to leave us. This affair is ours — mine and Violet's only, you see."

"He is right," said the vicar, rising. "I will ask you to let the story go no further in the meanwhile, Miss Harding. There is, I think, only one thing Mr. Palliser can do, but the responsibility is his."

The others went away with him, and for a moment or two Violet and Tony stood face to face. Then when the man would have spoken the girl turned from him with a little gesture of repulsion.

"No," she said faintly. "It is too horrible. I can bear nothing further now."

She swept away from him, and Tony, standing rigidly still with hands clenched, let her go. Then he turned and strode with bent head across the lawn.

Five minutes later Hester Earle, entering one of the rooms quietly with the vicar, found Nettie lying in a chair and apparently shivering. She looked up when she saw them, and then turned her head away.

"Oh, I know you don't want to talk to me!" she said. "Still, though I feel most horribly mean, I did it because I had to."

"Yes," said the vicar gently, "I think I understand. It must have cost you a good deal — and I fancy you were warranted."

"Then go away, both of you, and leave me alone," said Nettie faintly.

They turned away, and met Violet Wayne in the hall. She

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

made a little gesture when she saw their faces, as though to warn them from any expression of sympathy.

"You will excuse me, Hester," she said very quietly. "I think I would sooner walk home alone. I will not ask you to remember that what you heard concerns only Tony and me."

Then she turned and left them, walking slowly, and holding herself very straight with an effort.

XXI

TONY'S DECISION

TONY PALLISER walked home to Northrop, and was glad when he reached it, for he found even the slight physical effort difficult. He felt half-dazed, and brushed past two of his tenants who greeted him on the road without recognizing them. He did not remember whether he offered any explanation as to why he had not remained at Low Wood, as he had purposed, but by and by he found himself sitting in Godfrey Palliser's chair at the head of the great dinner-table. The big candles were lighted, for the evenings were drawing in, and as he vacantly noticed the glitter of the light on the glass and silver he remembered the opportunity that had been given him there. He had let it pass, and now another had spoken.

Still, as he strove to eat because he felt the servants' eyes upon him it was the loneliness of the shadowy hall that most troubled him. He had noticed it often since Godfrey Palliser died, for Tony was not fond of his own company; but he had pictured Violet Wayne sitting opposite him then, and now it was borne in upon him that she would never smile at him across his table. As yet he scarcely realized the depth of his humiliation, for it was the result of it which must be faced, and not the thing itself that filled him with horror.

It was a relief when somebody took his plate away, and he went out with a cigar he did not remember lighting into the cool night air and flung himself down in a seat on the terrace. There was no moon in the sky, but the stars were clear, and — for the night was still — a chilly dampness settled on everything. He felt it pleasantly cold upon his skin, and lay still huddled limply in the garden chair, trying to realize the position, but found the attempt almost useless, for his thoughts had no cohesion. It was, however, evident that the love of the woman he desired could never be his. She had given

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

him her promise, and he fancied that if he insisted she would redeem it, for he vaguely understood her sense of responsibility; but it was evident that he could not insist, and with the courage of desperation he nerved himself to face the fact that he must let her go. He could think of nothing else, for he was still bewildered by the blow, and could only realize what had been taken from him.

He did not know how long he lay there, but it was very late when he rose with a little shiver and went back into the hall, where he wrote a note.

"Tell John to ride over with that early to-morrow morning, and ask Miss Wayne for an answer," he said to the servant, who wondered at his face, and then walked slowly with hopelessness in his very pose towards his room, where, as it happened, he slept heavily until late next morning.

The next day, however, brought him further misery, for his perceptions were clearer now, and the difficulties he must meet more apparent, while he had also a horrible suspense to struggle with when the man he had sent with the note brought him an answer. It was very brief: "I will try to see you this evening."

Somehow the day dragged through, and Tony was glad when at last he left Northrop as darkness came, for the uncertainty was growing insupportable. It was, however, Mrs. Wayne who greeted him when he reached her house, and she looked at him gravely without shaking hands.

"Yes," she said, answering his unspoken question, "Violet has told me, and it is she who must decide. She will come down in a minute or two."

Tony was weak, but he had now the courage of hopelessness, and he met the lady's eyes.

"I will not try to influence her, madam, and can only thank you for allowing me to speak to her," he said.

Mrs. Wayne made no answer, but opened the door of a lighted room, and Tony, who sat down, waited for what seemed an interminable time until Violet came in. There was a curious hardness in her eyes, and her face was pale, so pale that it had an ivory gleam in the soft light, which the bronzy clusters of warm-tinted hair emphasized, but she was dressed with more than her accustomed taste, and held herself very straight. Tony rose when he saw her.

TONY'S DECISION

"I was almost afraid you would not see me," he said.

The girl sank into the chair he drew out, and he stood in front of her, with the hand he rested on the table trembling a little.

"I am not sure that it was wise," she said. "In a case like this one can only say nothing — or too much."

"I could bear the latter more easily," said Tony. "You know what I have done. We must have an understanding now."

His voice was hoarse, but it was even, and Violet Wayne regarded him with dispassionate interest. Tony, it seemed, had risen in his desperation, and his face was, as she had never seen it, set and almost grim.

"Then," she said quietly, "you have no excuse to make — nothing to urge in extenuation?"

"No. It is all true. There was only my love for you — and you must feel that a humiliation now."

Violet Wayne made a little gesture of weariness. "Tony," she said, "I don't quite catch your meaning, and we must speak plainly to-night."

"Well," said the man, in a voice that was curiously expressionless, "you heard Miss Harding's story. She was very fair — about Lucy Davidson — but you can realize how difficult it is for me to go into that?"

A trace of color crept into Violet Wayne's face, but her eyes were fixed upon her companion as she said slowly, "Still, I think it is necessary."

"Then I gave the girl a brooch — and once or twice talked nonsense with her — but it went no further. I can only give you my word for that — and nobody would blame you if you could not credit it. Her father did not, and I could not let you hear the story he built up."

Violet's face was faintly flushed with anger now. "That," she said, "is the one thing I could never forgive you, Tony. I know it is a trifle by comparison, but it hurts the most, and would have killed the confidence that would have drawn us together. You were afraid I would not believe you?"

"Yes, I was afraid."

The girl's anger seemed to melt away, and left her face pale again, while it was with a curious wistfulness she answered him.

"I evidently expected too much, but if you had told me I

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

would have believed you had everybody testified your guilt," she said. "Can't you understand that love without confidence is a worthless thing — and that had you trusted me I would have borne any suspicion or obloquy with you?"

Her voice broke, but there was once more a faintly scornful ring in it when after a few moments' silence she spoke again. "But you were afraid — afraid to trust me! Oh, it is almost unendurable!"

Tony stood still looking at her, with his heart throbbing painfully and vague wonder in his eyes. Then he moved forward with swift impulsiveness as though he would have flung himself upon his knees beside her chair, but she checked him with a gesture. Still, he stooped and laid a quivering hand upon her shoulder.

"I might have known," he said. "If I had had the courage you would have saved me from everything, but is it too late now? I did it because I loved you, Violet — and you will give me the chance to redeem myself. You can't destroy my last hope by casting me off?"

The girl looked up at him wearily. "A little more restraint, Tony. What has been done can never be undone — and I want to face the position quietly. Last night I struggled with the horror and bitterness of it, and one needs calmness now. We can never reopen the subject again."

Tony moved away from her, and once more leaned upon the table. His susceptibilities were curiously dulled, but still her coldness stung him like the lash of a whip, for he could see the contempt beneath it, and could more easily have borne scathing reproaches.

"Well," he said very slowly, "nothing can happen to me that I have not deserved. I make no defence."

He saw the little gleam in the girl's eyes, and there was something in her face which suggested faint approbation.

"I promised to marry you — and that carries an obligation, but you destroyed the love I had for you," she said.

"It would be a very hard thing, but I can give you that promise back. I have n't fallen quite so far that I would take you when you have only contempt for me. I have done wrong, but there may be a faint chance left me, in spite of my worthlessness. Is it quite out of the question that I should redeem the past?"

TONY'S DECISION

Violet sat motionless for the space of several minutes, and Tony felt the throbbing of his heart as he watched her. Then she said very slowly, "I cannot see my duty — and so it would be presumption to show you yours, but I am not the person you have wronged most grievously."

"No. You mean Bernard Appleby? Well, it would be almost too much to expect you to believe in me again; but I can, at least, show you I am sorry for what I have done — and if I brought him back —"

The girl slowly shook her head. "I can make no promise now," she said.

"Still, you would wish me to make it right with him?" and Tony stood still looking at her with a faint gleam of hope in his eyes.

"Not because I wish it, Tony. Can't you realize that you must make him reparation?"

Tony slowly straightened himself, but his face was quietly resolute. "Yes," he said. "I wonder if Miss Harding will tell me where he is? I am going to Cuba. Of course, it can never give me back your esteem. That I threw away — but perhaps as the days go by you will not think of me so bitterly. You will try? That is all I can ask for in the meanwhile."

Violet rose, outwardly very calm and cold, though her heart was throbbing painfully. There was something in the man's face she had never seen there before, and though he spoke very quietly the little thrill in his voice was not without its effect on her.

"I think Miss Harding is here now," she said. "She asked if she might come, and I fancied I heard her voice a little while ago, but I do not know if she will tell you. I am glad you are going, Tony."

Tony looked down on her gravely, with a curious wistfulness in his eyes, and then, before she quite grasped his intentions, laid his hands on her shoulders and kissed her cheeks.

"My only excuse is that I may never see you again," he said. "If Miss Harding will not tell me I will find him myself. I leave for London to-morrow, and go straight to Havana. I will not come back to England unless Bernard Appleby comes with me."

He turned abruptly, as though he feared his resolution might fail him, and it was not until Violet heard the door

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

swing to behind him that she realized she was alone. A minute or two later he was shown into a room where Hester Earle sat with Nettie Harding, and smiled a little when he saw the latter's heightened color.

"I have come to ask you a favor, Miss Harding," he said.
"I want you to tell me where to find Bernard Appleby."

"Why?" said the girl chillingly.

Tony made a little deprecatory gesture. "I deserve your suspicions, but I think you can trust me," he said. "I want to repair the wrong I did him, and bring him back to England."

Nettie looked at him steadily, though her face was flushed. "I don't know that he will come," she said. "He has a good deal to do there — and he has good friends in America."

Tony smiled curiously. "I was not asking you to do Appleby a kindness. I was thinking of myself."

Nettie appeared to understand him, for she took out a card and scribbled across it.

"I am sorry — and I think I know what you mean," she said as she handed it him. "If my father is in Cuba now — and I think he is — he will tell you just what to do."

Tony thanked her gravely, and with a little formal goodbye, which included Hester Earle, went out of the room. In another minute they heard the outer door close behind him, and Nettie's color grew a trifle deeper as she glanced at her companion.

"I could n't help it, but I 'm sorry I was n't quite sure of him now," she said. "There 's a great difference in that man since yesterday. He has had a rough shaking up, but it has brought all that 's good in him up on top."

Hester nodded. "There is a good deal that 's very nice at least in Tony," she said. "It is Violet I am most sorry for. She believed in him. I would n't worry her just yet, Nettie."

Violet Wayne in the meanwhile lay very still in her chair. The blow had blunted her susceptibilities, too, and the pain was less intense. She felt numb and passionless, and only realized that the man she had striven to believe in had never existed. The actual Tony had been shown to her, and it was with difficulty she had overcome the sense of disgust and horror which accompanied the revelation. Still, the evident

TONY'S DECISION

sincerity of his desire to make reparation had touched her, and she was sensible of a curious pity for him. The tenderness was, however, alloyed with contempt, and she wondered vaguely whether that would pass with time. In the meanwhile she was glad he was going to Cuba, for she would be more sure of herself, and where her duty lay, when he came back with his task accomplished, though she realized with a curious unconcern that she might never see him again. Then there was a little tapping at the door, and it was almost a relief to her when Nettie Harding came in.

"I feel horribly mean, and want to ask you to forgive me because I am going away in a day or two," she said. "Still, I felt I had to tell that story, and if it was necessary I think I would tell it again. I knew it would hurt you, but I couldn't help it."

Violet smiled a trifle wearily. "It was a little painful. One can't hide it. Still, I don't think anybody would blame you."

Nettie came forward and seized her hands impulsively. "My dear," she said, "it would almost have killed me, and I'm ever so sorry—but what could I do? And you know you told me when I tried to ask you that it was better to know the truth. Can't you understand that if it was only because you didn't know what kind of man he was I had to tell you?"

"And that was your only reason?"

"No. There was the other man who took the blame! I didn't tell you, but the insurrection has broken out around Santa Marta where he is again, and he has left all he had and gone back to his comrades because he promised he would when they wanted him, though he knew my father would have made him rich if he had stayed with him. When I thought of him, ragged, hungry, and thirsty, and perhaps wounded, too, while Tony Palliser had everything, I could not sit still and say nothing."

Violet's gaze grew steadier as she said, "What is that man to you?"

"Nothing. Only a friend. Oh, of course, you can't understand, but a girl in America can be quite fond of a man without falling in love with him. Bernard Appleby never tried even the mildest flirtation with me, and he'd have been sorry if he had. He's nice, and makes one trust him, but he's 'way behind the man I'm going to marry."

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

Her tone carried conviction with it, and Violet made a little gesture. "Yes," she said slowly, "it is not astonishing that you believe in him."

Then Nettie yielded to impulse, and made a venture. "There was nothing more," she said reflectively. "If I had thrown myself and my money at his feet he would n't have had me. I think, though he never told me, there was somebody in England he would always remember."

The big gray eyes were perfectly steady, but a faint trace of color showed in Violet's cheek.

"Well," she said slowly, "Tony is going out to find him."

Nettie felt a little thrill at what she had noticed, but she rose and, somewhat to her companion's astonishment, kissed her.

"I'll feel happier now I know you have forgiven me," she said.

She had gone in another minute, and Violet Wayne lay still with half-closed eyes and a weary face, while Tony drove home up the Northrop valley with a faint hope in his heart.

It was about the same hour next day when he laid several papers down on the table at which he sat in lawyer Craythorne's office with a little smile of content.

"It's all straight now and I'm glad," he said. "I can make Dane Cop over to Appleby because it never was an integral part of the estate, and it is worth a good deal to anybody now. It should, as you know, have been his in any case, while in the event of my dying unmarried he will get a share of the other property. I would have made it more only that Esmond Palliser has nearer claim."

Craythorne folded the will just signed. "It is wise to take precautions, but one would certainly expect you to marry," he said.

Tony rose, and smiled curiously as he straightened himself. "Well," he said, "one can never be sure of anything — and, you see, I am going to Cuba to-morrow. Travelling there must be a trifle risky just now. Still, I fancy I shall find Appleby."

XXII

MORALES MAKES A PROPOSAL

THE night was clear and hot when Appleby sat with Harper in the Café Salamanca looking out upon the plaza at Santa Marta. The big room was open-fronted, and only divided from the pavement by a row of wooden pillars and a balustrade. It was also, as usual, crowded with citizens who assembled there in the evening to discuss politics and the progress of the campaign, which accounted for the fact that Appleby sat quietly in a corner with a little glass of wine on the table in front of him. He realized it was highly desirable that he should obtain some insight into what was going on, for there was then a growing distrust of American imperialism which was perhaps not altogether unwarranted among the Cuban loyalists. Aliens were being watched with a jealous eye, and Appleby, who had already had difficulties with the petty officials, was aware that there was little the Administration contemplated that was not known in the cafés. Most men of Iberian extraction are apt at intrigue, and since the journals for excellent reasons usually maintained a discreet reticence popular discontent and factional bitterness found another vent.

It seemed to him that there was a vague expectancy and uneasiness upon everybody that evening, for the voices were lower than usual, and here and there a group sat silent turning over the latest journals from Spain, though at times a man would express himself with almost passionate vehemence and then stop abruptly, as though uncertain of his audience. It was known that American warships had been sighted on the Cuban coast, and one great vessel was even then lying in Havana harbor, and the men's dark eyes grew suspicious as they asked what it foretided. Appleby heard enough to convince him that if he hoped to carry on the business of the

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

hacienda considerable discretion would be necessary, and then turned his eyes upon the plaza.

The cazadores' band was playing there, and the patter of feet, swish of light dresses, jingle of steel, and murmur of voices broke through the music, for the citizens were as usual taking their evening promenade with their wives and daughters. The plaza was well lighted, and the mixture of broad-cloth, uniform, white duck, and diaphanous draperies caught the eye; and Appleby, who had artistic perceptions, found pleasure in watching the concourse stream through the light that shone out from the café. Grave merchant, portly señora draped in black, with powdered face, and slim, olive-cheeked señorita went by, smiling not infrequently over a lifted fan at an officer of cazadores with clinking sword, or a youthful exquisite from Havana in costly hat of Panama and toothpick-pointed shoes. Still, even where the press was thickest there was no jostling, for the assembly was good-humored and characterized by a distinguished courtesy. The men were Latins, and they could take their pleasure unconcernedly, though the land lay desolate and strewn with ashes only a few leagues away. Santa Marta was, for the most part, loyal, and, in spite of official corruption, and not infrequent abuse of authority, Spanish domination produced at least an outward decorum and sense of security in the tropics.

By and by the music stopped, and a murmur seemed to run round the plaza. It grew louder, and there was a clamor in one of the streets, then a shout and a bewildering hum of voices broke out. The men in the café rose to their feet, but Appleby, who laid his hand on Harper warningly, sat still. Something was evidently happening, and he knew the uncertain temper of the Latins. Then a man who pushed through the crowd sprang into the café flourishing what appeared to be a Havana journal and was seized by those about the door. A sudden tense silence, which was heightened by the clamor outside, followed the babel of questions, while one of the men who had grasped the paper opened it. Then he flung disjointed sentences at the rest in a voice which was hoarse with passion and apprehension.

"The American warship sunk at Havana with all her crew!" he said. "No, a few, it seems, were saved. American suggestions that she was destroyed by a torpedo insulting



Herbert Dunton

"THE BIG GAUNT AMERICAN AND SLIM LATIN REELED THROUGH THE
CAFÉ."—Page 205.

MORALES MAKES A PROPOSAL

to Spain. It is believed to be an explosion in the magazine. There will be demands for compensation. Attitude of the Americans unreasonable."

Harper rose up suddenly, a tall, commanding figure, with his face very grim, and brought a great fist crashing down upon the table.

"Good Lord!" he said hoarsely. "They've sunk the 'Maine'!"

Then striding forward he rent half of the journal from the man who held it. He thrust it upon Appleby, who followed him, and his face was almost gray with anger as he waved the rest aside.

"Read it! I can't trust my eyes," he said.

Appleby took the journal, and there was once more silence in the café, for Harper stood with his big hand clenched on the neck of a heavy decanter while his comrade read aloud in Castilian. The account was brief, and had evidently been written tactfully, but there were mixed with its expression of regret vague hints that in case of unwarranted American demands the Administration would remember what was due to Spanish dignity.

"It's horrible, Harper! Still, it must have been an accident," he said.

Harper stood very straight, with a blaze in his eyes and the veins on his forehead swelling.

"No," he said, and his voice rang through the café, so that men swung round and stared at him outside. "The devils sunk her. By the Lord, we'll whip them off the earth!"

He spoke in English, but his voice and attitude were significant, and a slim young officer of cazadores rose up at a table close beside him, and glanced at the rest.

"We shall know how to answer the insolence of these Americans, señores," he said, and held up his wine-glass as he turned to Harper. "It is demanded that you join us — *Viva la España!*"

The table went over, and the glass fell in shivers as Harper sprang. Next moment a frantic clamor broke out, and he had the officer by the waist and arm. A brown hand clutched at the sword, but dropped inert again, and the big gaunt American and slim Latin reeled through the café, over-

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

turning seats and tables as they went. Then they fell with a crash against the balustrade, and, though even Appleby could not quite understand how his comrade accomplished it, the officer of cazadores was swung from his feet, and went down full-length upon the pavement outside. A roar went up from the crowd, but while Appleby, who set his lips, wondered what the result of Harper's folly would be, two of the lights went out suddenly, and a hand touched his arm.

"It is not advisable to stay here," a low voice said. "There is a door at the back. Come with me."

The place was almost dark now, and Appleby contrived to seize Harper's shoulder and drag him back as the crowd poured in from the plaza. Once more somebody touched him, and a man overturned a larger table, which brought down three or four of those who made at them most fiercely, while in another moment or two he found himself, still clutching Harper, in a shadowy calle behind the café. He turned to thank the two men he saw beside him, but one ran up the street, and the other, slipping back into the café, slammed the door in his face. Harper stared at him, gasping.

"Let go of me. I'm going back to kill two or three of them," he said.

Appleby thrust him forward into the street. "You are not while I can hold you," he said. "It seems to me you have done quite enough!"

Harper turned and glared at him, but Appleby still clutched his shoulder resolutely, and his face relaxed. "Well," he said more calmly, "I guess I've hurt more than the feelings of one of them. What did that fellow shove us out for, anyway?"

"I don't know," said Appleby. "Perhaps he was afraid of their wrecking the café, or he didn't want us hurt. We seem to have more friends than we are aware of in Santa Marta. It is apparently convenient at times to be connected with the Sin Verguenza."

Harper, who shook off his anger, followed him down the street, but he stopped again when they crossed another one that led back to the plaza. They could see the wide opening, with the white walls that hemmed it in cutting against the soft indigo of the sky, and hear the confused murmurs that rose out of it. Then there was a crash of music that rang, as it

MORALES MAKES A PROPOSAL

were, exultantly across the shadowy town until a tumultuous roar of voices drowned the Royal March of Spain.

Harper clenched one hand. "You hear them!" he said. "Well, they'll get their answer by and by, and they're not going to feel like shouting when we're through with them."

Appleby said nothing. He understood the hot Castilian temperament, and the outburst of sentiment was comprehensible, but the news of the disaster had also sent a chill of horror and suspicion through him. Still, he laid his hand with a restraining grasp on Harper's arm, and they went on silently to the "Four Nations," where they had left the vehicle in which they had driven out from the hacienda.

It was, somewhat to Appleby's astonishment, next evening before they heard anything more of the affair, and then, as he sat in the big barely furnished general room at San Cristoval, Pancho, the major-domo, came up to say that the Colonel Morales was waiting below. Appleby bade him bring out cigars and wine, and rose from his seat when Morales came in. He shook hands urbanely, unbuckled his sword, and laid his kepi on the table, and then sat down with an expression of concern in his olive face which Appleby fancied was assumed. It was then about eight o'clock in the evening, and had been dark two hours, but it was very hot, and the door and window lattices which opened on the veranda had been flung wide. There was, however, no moon, and black shadows closed in upon the scanty strip of light that shone outside.

"I have come as a friend on a somewhat delicate business," said Morales, pouring out a glass of wine. "The affair is, as you will realize, a serious one."

Appleby, who fancied he understood his man, smiled. "I scarcely think it is. Nobody attaches much importance to a trifling dispute in a café. One has also to make allowances in moments of political excitement."

"It is not a trifle brutally to assault a Spanish officer, as you would have discovered had I not held back the order for your friend's arrest," said Morales dryly.

"Still, one would scarcely fancy the officer in question would wish everybody to hear of it. He had, if I remember correctly, his sword with him. I am only suggesting this because it seems to me that in his case I would prefer the affair arranged quietly."

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

The color appeared to grow a trifle warmer in Morales' cheek, and there was a faint sparkle in his eyes, but though it seemed to cost him an effort he smiled.

"You have, as I surmised, considerable discretion," he said. "Well, I will admit that the view I urged upon the Teniente Pinillo much resembled yours. In fact, it is conceivable that he would be willing to entertain any honorable amend your comrade should think fit to make him."

Appleby decided that he would gain nothing by showing any special eagerness to straighten out the difficulty, since he had reasons for believing that it was not mere friendliness which had brought Morales there.

"Of course, that is the sensible view," he said. "Still, knowing the delicate pride of your countrymen, I am a trifle astonished that the Teniente Pinillo proved so amenable to reason."

A little grim twinkle crept into Morales' eyes. "It was at my suggestion. When I venture to make a recommendation it is apt to prove convincing."

Appleby knew that this was the case, for the little olive-faced soldier was more dreaded in that country than the Sin Verguenza. He also felt that it was not without a reason the dark eyes were fixed upon him searchingly.

"That is not astonishing," he said. "Well, I fancy the one I intend to make will also be considered by the Señor Harper. I will send for him by and by."

Morales sat still a minute or two fingering his cigar, with his back to the window, and the light upon his face. Appleby had foreseen this when he drew out a chair for him, but he could himself follow the stream of light that shone out across the veranda, and fancied that a shadowy object was crouching just outside it. His ears were also keen, and he had once or twice caught an almost imperceptible sound. Then Morales turned to him.

"Your comrade was concerned in another affair which cannot be arranged so easily," he said. "It is not so very long ago since he was seen carrying arms in the Alturas Pass."

It was only by a strenuous effort that Appleby sat very still, and strove to keep his face expressionless. "That is your contention!" he said. "You do not expect me to admit it?"

MORALES MAKES A PROPOSAL

The two men looked at each other steadily for almost a minute, and then Morales smiled. "It is of no importance. Here are no witnesses," he said. "He had, however, a companion, Señor Appleby."

Appleby had expected this, and was prepared. He was also by no means as sure as Morales seemed to be that there were no witnesses, but the uncertainty on that point did not trouble him. He had a quiet confidence in Pancho, and the only men the latter allowed near the house had, Appleby felt certain, at least a suspicion of his connection with the Sin Verguenza. He listened intently, and though everything seemed very still, again fancied he heard a very faint sound on the veranda.

"How long have you known this?" he said.

"Since you came to the hacienda, I think," said Morales dryly. "It was a very poor compliment you paid me when you fancied that you had deceived me."

"Then would it be too much to ask exactly how much you know?"

Morales laughed. "I will put my cards on the table. There was the attack on Santa Marta, the affair at Alturas, and the escape of a prisoner the night of the Alcalde's ball. There are, I think, other counts one could urge against you, but those I have mentioned would be sufficient."

Appleby decided to make an experiment. "It seems to me," he said, "that so much knowledge is apt to prove dangerous to the man who possesses it."

"You mean—"

"I have but to raise my voice, and you would find it difficult to get out of the hacienda San Cristoval alive."

It was evident that the little officer's nerves were good, for he smiled contemptuously.

"That difficulty has been provided against," he said. "There are two or three files of infantry not very far away, my friend, and two of my officers have precise instructions as to what to do in case I am absent a suspicious time."

Appleby laughed, for, though he fancied there was something behind it, the man's frankness was not without its effect on him. His fearlessness he took as a matter of course, for it was not without a reason Morales bore the title of the Sword.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"Then," he said, "we come to the question what do you want from me?"

"As a commencement it would be pleasanter to mention what I can offer you, and that would be employment on special service by the Administration at a reasonable remuneration. I may admit that you have abilities. Still, should you prefer it, you could be sent to the coast with a permit that would take you safely out of Cuba instead. You are here to make money, which is, however, scarce in Cuba just now, and the revolution is no affair of yours."

"Well," said Appleby, "we will come back to my question."

"Then I ask very little. Certain papers of the Señor Harding's which are in your possession, and the perusal of the communications that pass through your hands."

Appleby was glad he had his back to the light, for he felt his face grow hot, but, though it cost him an effort, he maintained an outward tranquillity, and sat still, rolling in his fingers the cigar he took up. Morales' purpose was plain to him. He was known to be a loyal soldier, but he was also a man with an insatiable greed, and Appleby was aware that Harding, perhaps forecasting an American occupation, had been making overtures to the insurgents. Indeed, though Harding had never entirely taken him into his confidence, he had seen enough to convince him that he was playing a very risky game. Morales, it seemed, suspected it, and apparently desired sufficient proof to bring Harding within his grasp, which, Appleby surmised, would only relax when the American had been largely denuded of his possessions. Then another thought flashed into his mind. He had once or twice seen Morales' dark eyes fixed on Nettie, and knew that he was one who usually obtained what he set his heart upon, while Harding was on his way to Cuba even then. If he proved obdurate, and Morales had anything to support his demands with, it might go hard with him.

This was plain to Appleby, though his perceptions were somewhat blunted by the anger he felt. Morales' suggestion that he was capable of such treachery stung him to the quick, but he was quite aware that the retort incisive would be puerile folly, and that if he was to prove he realized his obligation to Harding he must proceed circumspectly. As affairs stood just then Morales held him beneath his thumb.

MORALES MAKES A PROPOSAL

"It is a proposal that must have consideration. There are difficulties," he said, and hoped his voice did not betray him.

"I think," said Morales dryly, "that haste would be advisable."

"Still, I must have until this time to-morrow."

Morales rose, put on his kepi, and buckled on his sword. Then he turned to Appleby with a little significant smile.

"Until then, though it is quite unnecessary," he said. "I think a very few minutes' reflection will convince you that my proposal should be acceded to. In that case you will find me at the cuartel any time to-morrow."

Appleby went out with him, and as they descended the stairway the officer stopped.

"I fancy I heard somebody in the shadows yonder," he said.

"Yes," said Appleby dryly, raising his voice a trifle, "it is quite likely that somebody is there. In this country one takes precautions. You, however, have my word that in your case there is no necessity for apprehension."

Morales laughed a little. "It is well that I took mine, but I will ask you for your company as far as the carretera, Señor Appleby. One does not attach too much importance even to the word of a gentleman just now."

They walked through the dusky cane together, and parted with punctilious salutations when they reached the dim white road. Then Appleby went back to the house, and met Harper at the foot of the stairway.

"Colonel Morales came to demand an apology from you, and I promised him that you would make it," he said.

Harper seemed hoarse with anger. "I could scarcely keep my hands off him as it was. It would have pleased me to pound the life out of him."

"Well," said Appleby dryly, "I scarcely think it will be necessary to make the apology now, but I can't tell you anything more until to-morrow. There is a good deal I must think over."

He went up the stairway, and sat for at least an hour staring straight before him with an unlighted cigar in his hand. Then he rose with a little weary smile, and tapped a suspended strip of tin, which rang dissonantly until the major-domo came in.

"You know where Don Maccario is?" he said.

Pancho's eyes twinkled. "I think I could find him."

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"Then remember what I tell you," said Appleby, who laid his hand on the man's shoulder, spoke softly and rapidly, until the latter nodded.

"With permission, I will give the message to three other men who can be trusted and start at once," he said.

"Is it necessary?" said Appleby, with a faint trace of astonishment.

Pancho smiled significantly. "I think it is," he said. "Morales makes certain. He leaves nothing to chance."

XXIII

APPLEBY TAKES A RISK

IT was early next morning when Appleby and Harper sat at breakfast on the veranda. The white wall across the patio already shone dazzlingly against a strip of intense blue, and a patch of brightness grew broader across the veranda, but it was pleasantly cool as yet. From beyond the flat roof there rose the rasping thud of machetes swinging amidst the cane and the musical clink of hoes, with the dull rumble of the crushing machinery as an undertone.

Appleby had apparently not slept very well, for there was weariness in his face, and he lay a trifle more limply than usual in his chair, with a morsel of bread and a very little cup of bitter black coffee in front of him, for in Spanish countries the regular breakfast is served later in the morning. Harper seemed to notice the absence of the major-domo.

“Bread and coffee! Well, when he can’t get anything else one can live on them, but if Pancho had been around he’d have found us something more,” he said. “Their two meals a day never quite suited me. We have steak and potatoes three times in my country.”

“I have seen you comparatively thankful to get one,” said Appleby. “I’m not sure that we will even have bread and coffee to fall upon in another day or two.”

Harper glanced at him sharply. “Where’s Pancho?”

“I sent him away last night with a message for Maccario.”

“As the result of Morales coming round?”

Appleby nodded. “Yes,” he said. “He made a demand I could not entertain.”

“About me?”

“Not exactly. I told him you felt sorry you had wounded the susceptibilities of his officer.”

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

Harper laughed. "Well," he said, "there's only one thing I'm sorry for, and that is that I let up before I'd put the contract through. Still, I guess there's more behind it."

"There is," said Appleby gravely. "If you can keep quiet a minute or two I'll tell you."

He spoke rapidly and concisely, and Harper's face flushed as he listened. "You let him go!" he said. "Pancho and I were hanging round on the stairway."

Appleby smiled a trifle wearily. "I suspected it, but Morales is a good deal too cunning to take any unnecessary risks. If he had not come back we should have had half a company of cazadores turning up to ask what had become of him. Now I want you to understand the position. What are your countrymen likely to do about the 'Maine'?"

Harper's eyes gleamed, and his voice was hoarse. "Make the Spaniards lick our boots or wipe them off the earth!"

"Well," said Appleby dryly, "you may do the last, but, if I know the Spaniards, you will never extort anything from them that would stain their national dignity. Still, I think you are right about your countrymen's temper, and you see what it leads to. Every battalion of Spanish infantry will be wanted on the coast, and that will give the insurgents a free hand. It means they will once more be masters of this district, and that Santa Marta must fall. Believing that, I'm going to take a risk that almost frightens me."

"I don't quite understand," said Harper.

"Harding is on his way to Cuba, and he has large sums sunk in San Cristoval and other places up and down the island. Once he gets here Morales will grind them out of him. Now, it is evident that Harding has as much sympathy with the insurgents as he has with the loyalists, and perhaps rather more, while just now he must stand in with one of them. It seems to me that if your people can't be pacified the Spaniards will be driven out of Cuba."

"Still," said Harper reflectively, "I don't quite see why we should worry about that. Since you can't sell Harding—and that's quite plain—all we have to do is to light out quietly."

Appleby smiled. "I scarcely think we could manage it; and while I take Harding's money there's an obligation on

APPLEBY TAKES A RISK

me to do what I can for him. That is why I'm going to commit him definitely to standing in with the insurgents."

Harper stared at him in astonishment, and then brought his fist down with a bang on the table. "You are going to bluff the Spaniards, and play Sugar Harding's hand?" he said with wondering respect. "You have 'most nerve enough to make a railroad king — but if it does n't come off, and they patch up peace again?"

"Then," said Appleby very quietly, "what I am going to do will cost Harding every dollar he has in Cuba, though that does n't count for so much since Morales means to ruin him, anyway. I can only make a guess, and stake everything on it. Your countrymen will ask too much, the Spaniards will offer very little. Still, it's an almost overwhelming decision."

Again Harper looked at him with a faint flush in his face, for the boldness of the venture stirred the blood in him. "It's the biggest thing I've ever had a hand in," he said. "Still, wherever it leads to, I'm going through with you!"

"It is quite likely that it will lead us in front of a firing party," said Appleby. "I have reasons for believing that Maccario is not far away, and I have asked him to occupy the hacienda. It commands the carretera to Santa Marta, and I fancy a handful of determined men could hold it against a battalion, while with it in their possession the Sin Verguenza would dominate this part of the country, in spite of Morales. He has, as you know, been sending troops away. The one thing that troubles me is the uncertainty whether Maccario can get here to-night."

"Well," said Harper, "it's quite an important question, and I don't understand why we're staying here. I'd far sooner light out at once and meet him. If Morales turns up in the meanwhile we're going to have trouble."

Appleby smiled dryly. "I'm afraid we would not get very far," he said. "Still, if it's only to find out whether my notion is correct, we can try it."

Harper picked up what was left of the bread, and with characteristic caution slipped it into his pocket. "It may come in handy. I've been out with the Sin Verguenza before," he said.

They went down the stairway, along the tram-line, and out upon the Santa Marta road, but they had scarcely made half

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

a mile when they came upon a sergeant and several files of cazadores sitting in the shadow by the roadside. Harper stopped abruptly and Appleby smiled.

"The road is closed, then, Sergeant?" he said.

"No, señor," said the man. "Still, it is not very safe."

"Not even as far as Santa Marta?"

The sergeant shook his head. "If you are going there I will send two files with you," he said.

Appleby glanced at Harper, who clenched a big hand, and appeared to have some difficulty in restraining himself. "I don't think we will trouble you," he said. "You had instructions from the Colonel Morales?"

"He seemed anxious about your safety, señores," said the man.

Appleby turned upon his heel, and walked back the way he had come with Harper, murmuring anathemas upon Morales beside him, until the sergeant was out of sight.

"I expected it!" he said.

"Well," said Harper dryly, "this is not the only way out of the place. We'll try another."

They walked back to the hacienda, passed the sugar mill, and followed the little tram-line that wound through the cane until once more Harper came to a standstill, and his face grew a trifle grim. It was very hot, and the rails flung back the light dazzlingly between the tall green blades, but there was another suggestive blink of brightness among the long banana leaves in front of them.

"More of them!" he said hoarsely.

They walked on a few paces, and then a non-commissioned officer of cazadores in dusty white uniform moved out on to the line.

"Well," said Harper brusquely, "what are you wanting here?"

The man made a little deprecatory gesture as he said, "We were sent."

Appleby made as though he would brush past him, but the soldier, moving a trifle, stood in front of him.

"With permission, señor, it is safer about the hacienda," he said. "Still, if you wish to go out into the country I will send a man or two with you."

Appleby laughed. "Then you are not alone?"

APPLEBY TAKES A RISK

The soldier called softly, and three or four men in uniform appeared amidst the banana leaves. "It seems," he said, "the Colonel Morales is anxious about the hacienda."

Harper glanced at his comrade ruefully, but an inspiration dawned on Appleby. "One appreciates his solicitude. It is conceivable that your comrades would know what to do with a bottle or two of caña. A little is beneficial when one has passed the night in the open. There was, I think, a heavy dew."

"With thanks, but it is not permitted," said the man. "We did not, however, leave Santa Marta until there was a little light in the sky."

"Colonel Morales was good enough to send a strong detachment?"

The soldier shook his head. "A section of the Barremeda company," he said. "The Sergeant Hernando was to follow with a few files when he came in from picket duty. One does not understand it, for the country is quiet now, but one asks no questions of an officer."

"It is not usually advisable," said Appleby with a smile. "Still, if you change your mind about the caña you can come up to the hacienda and ask for me."

He swung round, and five minutes later sat down on a truck on the tram-line. Harper leaned against it, and looked at him.

"I guess Morales means to make sure of us," he said. "Well, we can only hope for Maccario. You could n't ask him if the men you sent got through?"

"I made the venture, and he told me. It was last night I sent the men out, and the cazadores only started this morning. Morales blundered then, but it is rather more than likely he could n't help himself. Nobody would call him timid, but just now it would have been a risky thing for him to go back to Santa Marta alone."

Harper nodded. "There's not much you don't think of," he said. "Still, it seems to me quite likely that Maccario can't get through."

"Then so far as you and I are concerned I'm afraid the game is played out," said Appleby.

Harper pulled out his cigar case and wrenched it open. "Take a smoke," he said. "I don't feel like talking just now."

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

He sat down on a sleeper with his back to a wheel, while Appleby lay upon the truck with a cigar, which went out in his hand, gazing across the sunlit cane. It rose about him breast-high, a crude glaring green, luminous in its intensity of color, against the blueness above it, but Appleby scarcely saw it, or the gleaming lizard which lay close by suspiciously regarding him. He had made a very bold venture, and, though Harding might yet benefit by it, he could realize the risk that he and his comrade ran.

There was, however, consolation in the thought that Morales could not have known he had sent for the Sin Verguenza, or he would have flung a company of cazadores into the hacienda. A few resolute men could, Appleby fancied, hold it against a battalion, for there were no openings but narrow windows, and those high up, in the outer walls, while, if the defenders tore the veranda stairway up, the patio would be apt to prove a death-trap to the troops that entered it. It also seemed to him that, now the prospect of complications with the Americans would everywhere stir the insurgents to activity, Morales would scarcely have men to spare for a determined assault upon the hacienda.

The longer Appleby reflected the more sure he felt that he had made a wise decision. It had, however, cost him an effort to face the risk, and now he wondered a little at his own fearlessness. He who had hitherto haggled about trifles and pored over musty papers in a country solicitor's office had been driven into playing a bold man's part in the great game of life, and the reflection brought him a curious sense of content. Even if he paid the forfeit of his daring, as it seemed he would in all probability do, he had, at least, proved himself the equal, in boldness of conception and clearness of vision, of men trained to politics and war, and he found the draught he had tasted almost intoxicating.

The exhilaration of it had vanished now, but the vague content remained and blunted the anxieties that commenced to creep upon him. Still, he fell to wondering where Maccario was, and how long it would take him to reach San Cristoval, for Morales would demand his answer soon after nightfall. He lay very still while the shadow of the cane grew narrower, until the sun shone hot upon his set brown face, and then slowly stood up.

APPLEBY TAKES A RISK

"I think we will go back and pay the men," he said. "The few pesetas mean a good deal to them, and I would sooner they got them than Morales."

They went back together silently, and the whistle shrieked out its summons when the mill stopped for the men's ten o'clock breakfast. Appleby drew them up as they came flocking in, and handed each the little handful of silver due to him.

"You will go back to work until the usual hour," he said. "If all goes well you will begin again to-morrow, but this is a country in which no one knows what may happen."

The men took the money in grave wonder, and Appleby, who did not eat very much, sat down to breakfast, but both he and Harper felt it a relief when the plates were taken away.

"You will keep them busy, if it is only to stop them talking," he said. "I have wasted too much time already, and if I am to straighten up everything by this evening there is a good deal to do."

Harper went out, and Appleby, sitting down in his office, wrote up accounts until the afternoon. He dare leave no word for Harding, but that appeared unnecessary, for if Harding found San Cristoval in the possession of the Sin Verguenza he would, Appleby felt certain, understand and profit by the position. The room resembled an oven, and no more light than served to make writing possible entered the closed lattices; but with the perspiration dripping from him Appleby toiled on, and the last Spanish dollar had been accounted for when Harper and the man who carried the *comida* came up the stairway. Then it was with a little sigh he laid down his pen and tied the neatly engrossed documents together. The life he led at San Cristoval suited him, and now he was to turn his back on it and go back once more, a homeless and penniless adventurer, to the Sin Verguenza. Glancing up he saw Harper leaning on a bureau and looking at him.

"That's another leaf turned down," he said. "A good deal may happen to both of us before to-morrow."

Harper nodded gravely. "Oh yes," he said. "That's why I'm going to make a kind of special dinner. I don't think I had much breakfast, and I don't quite know when we may get another."

The dinner he had given the cook instructions concerning was rather more elaborate than usual, and flasks of red and

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

amber wine stood among the dishes and the piled-up fruit. Neither of them had much to say, but they ate, and when very little remained on the table Harper leaned back in his chair with a smile of content.

"That's one thing Morales can't take away from me, and I guess it should carry me on quite a while," he said.

They lay still, cigar in hand, for the most part of an hour, and then as the sunlight faded from the patio Harper appeared to grow restless. Appleby watched him with a little smile.

"You don't seem quite easy," he said.

Harper stared at him, and then broke into a somewhat hollow laugh. "It's a fact," he said. "I was kind of wondering if it was n't time Pancho or one of the other men came back. I guess one could see them on the tram-line from the roof. Morales will be here in an hour or two."

He went out, and Appleby sat still, not because that was pleasant, but because he felt the necessity of holding himself in hand. He desired to retain a becoming tranquillity, and now he could only wait found that the tension was growing unendurable. There was no sound in the patio, where the light was failing, but he could hear Harper's footsteps on the flat roof above, and found himself listening eagerly as his comrade paced up and down. He stopped once, and Appleby felt his heart beating, for it seemed that something had seized Harper's attention. The footsteps, however, commenced again, and then Harper, who appeared to stop once more for a second, came hastily down the outside stairway. Appleby felt his fingers trembling, and it was only by effort he sat still instead of moving to the door to question him. If Harper had seen anything it was evident his comrade would hear of it in a moment or two.

He came on down the stairway, and when he reached the veranda Appleby closed one hand as he moved in his chair, but Harper passed on down the lower stairway, and Appleby sat still again, while a curious little shiver ran through him. Half an hour had elapsed before his comrade came in again and flung himself down in the nearest chair. He shook his head disgustedly, and his face was very grim.

"No sign of Pancho, and I'm not going back," he said. "I guess watching for folks who don't come gets kind of worrying. There's another thing. I went prospecting down the

'APPLEBY TAKES A RISK

tram-line, and found that sergeant had brought his men closer in."

"I could have told you that," said Appleby. "If I had thought we could have got away I would scarcely have been quietly sitting here."

Harper's face flushed. "Well," he said, "it's Maccario or Morales now."

He lighted a cigar and sat still, though his big hands quivered now and then, and the veins showed swollen on his forehead. The light grew rapidly dim, and at last Appleby moved sharply when a man came up the stairway with a lamp. Harper laughed unpleasantly.

"It can't last very long now," he said. "We'll know what's going to happen in the next half-hour."

Appleby glanced at him languidly. "There is," he said, "one thing that would induce Morales to let us slip through his fingers."

Harper stood up and straightened himself, clenching his hands on the chair back as he stared at Appleby.

"If I thought you meant it I'd stop your talking for ever now," he said. "Oh, I've now and then done a smart thing, and nobody expects too much from me, but I haven't sold a countryman to the Spaniards yet — the devils who sunk the 'Maine'!"

Appleby laughed. "I think," he said quietly, "you had better sit down."

Harper said nothing, but when he turned and flung himself into the chair his eyes were eloquent, and there was for almost an hour a tense silence in the room. It seemed interminable to Appleby, but at last there was a tramp of feet outside, and they rose simultaneously, Harper flushed and Appleby a trifle gray in face. Then there were footsteps on the stairway, and Morales came in with two or three files of cazadores behind him. He glanced at the two men, and his face grew a trifle harder, while a little vindictive sparkle crept into his eyes. Still, his voice was coldly even.

"I had the honor of making you a proposal last night, Señor Appleby," he said.

Appleby nodded. "I am sorry that I found I could not entertain it," he said.

Morales let his hand fall on the hilt of his sword. "Then

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

there is only one course open to me. I place these men in your custody, sergeant, and until you hand them over in the guardroom at Santa Marta you will be answerable for them."

The sergeant made a little sign, two men moved forward, and in another minute Appleby and Harper went down the stairway and saw a section of cazadores waiting in the patio.

XXIV

RESPITED

A FAINT light was creeping in through the narrow window when Appleby awoke in a little upper room in the cuartel at Santa Marta. Worn out by the tense anxiety he had undergone he had at last slept restlessly, and for a moment or two he was only sensible that his surroundings were unfamiliar. Simply as he had lived at San Cristoval the room seemed unusually bare, while his limbs ached a little, and he wondered why he was lying on a thin strip of matting, and what Harper, who lay close beside him, apparently asleep, was doing there.

Then he shook himself into wakefulness as memory came back, and the events of the preceding night arranged themselves before him. He remembered his brief trial by Morales and a handful of officers, who deferred to him — for Santa Marta was under martial law — the written process declaring his offences, and the smile in Morales' dark eyes when he admitted that he had nothing to urge in extenuation. One point alone he contested, and that was that he and Harper had supplied the insurgents with arms from San Cristoval, but the process proved that rifles had been carried into the factory, and his assertion that it was done without his knowledge only called forth a smile of incredulity. Then came the sentence, which Appleby listened to with the unconcern of desperation, and Harper, standing with great hands clenched and face dark with passion, answered with a torrent of furious invective in luminous American and Castilian, until two cazadores dragged him away.

Appleby shivered, and rising softly walked to the window as he remembered that the day that was breaking was the last he would ever see. He flung the lattice open, and his face grew grim as he looked out upon the town. It was as yet, for the most part, dim and shadowy, and two square church

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

towers rose blackly against a sky of paling indigo, but here and there a white wall glimmered faintly, and a pearly lustre suffused the east. While he watched it became streaked with crimson, for in the tropics dawn comes suddenly, and by and by a long shaft of brightness streamed up into the sky. Then the city emerged from the shadow, and once more shone dazzlingly white in the morning sun.

It awoke as suddenly, for men rise early in that country to work while it is cool, and a ringing of bugles rose from beyond the flat roofs clear and musical, while the white walls flung back the patter of feet, and the hum of voices became audible. Appleby listened with a dull hopelessness that was too intense for bitterness to the stir of reawakening life, though the contrast between his lot and that of the men whose voices he heard had its effect on him. They were going out to their toil, and would in due time sleep again, but before that day was over he would be at rest forever. Then as somebody went by below singing a little light-hearted song he turned away with a groan, and saw that Harper was watching him.

" You have n't much use for singing," he said.

Appleby sat down with his back against the wall, and laughed somewhat hollowly. " No," he said. " The only appropriate music would be a requiem."

" Well," said Harper reflectively, " I don't quite know, though I'm free to admit that I'm feeling a good deal more anxious than I care about. I was thinking, and did n't sleep much last night, and it kind of seems to me the Spaniards have about enough on their backs just now."

Appleby shook his head. " The trouble is that Morales will take care that all anybody of consequence knows is that two of the Sin Verguenza were extinguished in Santa Marta," he said.

" Still, there's another point. Morales does n't let up too easily on anything he means to put through, and he would n't get very much out of either of us when we're dead."

Appleby turned upon him almost savagely. " Stop," he said. " You know the thing is decided as well as I do. Yesterday took a good deal of the stiffening out of me — and in another hour or two we shall have a tolerably difficult part to play."

RESPITED

Harper's face grew suddenly grim. "Well," he said a trifle hoarsely, "I guess we can face what is coming as well as a Spaniard can, and — I've got to admit it — nobody could expect any more from any man."

Appleby made no answer, but it was by an effort that, feeling his comrade's eyes upon him, he sat still, when the door opened and a cazadore came in. He laid down a piece of bread and a bottle of thin red wine, and then glanced at them compassionately.

"When will it be?" asked Appleby very quietly.

The man made a little gesture. "Soon, I think. There is a parade fixed in an hour from now."

He went out, and Harper's hands quivered a little as he held up the wine and glanced at Appleby.

"It's not often I don't feel inclined to eat, but I don't seem to have much use for breakfast now," he said. "Here's to the folks who'll wonder what has happened to us back there in the country we came from!"

He drank, and handed the wine to Appleby, who stood up as he put the bottle to his lips. It was, however, not Tony Palliser or Nettie Harding, but a woman with grave gray eyes, that now when the shadows were closing round him he drank to as it were reverently. She would, as Harper had suggested, never even know what had befallen him, but she seemed very near him then, and he felt the influence of her serenity upon him.

He laid down the bottle, and Harper took out two cigars. "Now," he said, "I guess when they come for me I'll be ready."

The hour that followed seemed interminable, but at last there was a tramp of feet on the stairway, and a sergeant of cazadores who came in made a sign to them. They rose in silence, and were thrust amidst a cluster of other prisoners in the patio, while an officer reading from a paper called their names aloud. Then a guard with bayonets fixed closed in about them, and they passed out through an archway into the street. Appleby blinked about him with half-closed eyes, for he had come out of the shadow, and the white walls were dazzlingly bright, while from out of the press of close-packed humanity beneath them came the flash of steel.

Then the crowd opened up, and a company of cazadores

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

that filed out of another opening halted a moment to wait for the prisoners' guard. Appleby was driven forward and took his place among the rest, there was a ringing of bugles that drowned the hum of voices from the crowd, and they had started on their last journey to the doleful tapping of the drums. Morales, it seemed, understood his countrymen, and meant to gratify the Iberian lust of sensation which finds vent in the bull-ring, and is akin to that which packed the amphitheatres in the days of ancient Rome. Still, Appleby noticed vacantly that the loyalist city seemed curiously unresponsive, for the shout that went up when the troops moved forward died away, and the tapping of the drums broke sharply through a brief silence that was almost portentous.

It was followed by a low murmuring that suggested the sound of the sea, and gazing at the rows of intent faces Appleby noticed that hats were swept off as the prisoners passed, and that here and there a man crossed himself. Once a burst of *Vivas* went up, but the murmurs that answered them were hoarse and angry, and for a space of minutes there was once more a heavy silence that seemed intensified by the beat of marching feet and the tapping of the drums.

Appleby saw the faces at the windows and upon the roofs, swept a glance along the crowd that lined the pavement, and with a little tingling of his nerves turned his eyes away. He felt a horror of these men who had come to watch him die, and set his lips and struggled with an almost overwhelming impulse to fling bitter jibes or anathemas at them as he stared straight before him. Harper was walking quietly at his side, and a pace or two in front were four of their companions in misfortune — a lad who limped, an old man, and two peons who laughed now and then. Beyond them he could see a forest of wavering rifles crested with flashing steel, and the figure of a mounted officer silhouetted sharply against a strip of sky.

Way was made for them, and the march went on. The trampling feet clashed rhythmically upon the stones, the rows of crowded windows and long white walls slid behind, and then while a blast of the bugles rang across the town Appleby found himself plodding into the smaller plaza. There was a long flash of sunlight on steel, the leading company split up and wheeled, and while the files tramped past he and the

RESPITED

guard were left standing with a double rank of cazadores behind them at one end of the plaza. In another two or three moments it was lined two deep by men with bayonets holding back the crowd; but the church with the two towers closed the opposite end, and Appleby noticed vacantly how dazzlingly white the empty space shone in the sun, save where the long black shadow of the cross above fell athwart it. The church door was, as usual, open, and the sound of an organ came out from it dolefully. Except for that, there was for almost a minute a silence that grew horribly oppressive.

Then a voice was raised, and read what appeared to be a list of the prisoners' offences, but Appleby could attach no meaning to it, and set his lips when the man with the paper called three names aloud. It was with a revulsion of feeling that left him very cold he realized that none of them was his or Harper's, but next moment he almost wished that they had been included in the summons. He had no hope now, and found the task of standing there unmoved before those swarming faces becoming insuperably difficult.

The lad who limped shuffled forward across the plaza, with the two peons and a guard behind, until they stopped and turned again a foot or two from the church wall. The peons were men with patient brown faces dressed simply in white cotton and unstarched linen, and Appleby fancied that their offence was in all probability the smuggling of arms or communications for the insurgents. Then he became aware by a sudden hum of voices that something unexpected was going on, and turning his eyes saw two priests appear in the porch of the church, and a sergeant standing somewhat sheepishly before them. One was little and portly, in shabby cassock, but he spoke in a shrill vehement voice, and his face was flushed; the other stood on the step above him, a tall man in ornate vestments that made a blaze of color in the porch, and he held one arm up commandingly.

Appleby could not hear what they said, for only his visual senses seemed to have retained their efficiency, but he fancied they were protesting when the sergeant moved slowly back across the plaza. Appleby turned and watched him stop with lifted hand before the colonel, but Morales did what few other men in that country would have ventured on when,

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

making a contemptuous gesture, he sent the sergeant back with his answer, and sat still in his saddle with one hand on his hip.

Still, the priests persisted, and would apparently have moved forward from the church, when there was a flash of steel and tramp of feet, and four or five files of infantry who had evidently little liking for their task halted in front of the porch. This time there was a hoarse portentous note in the murmurs of the crowd, and Appleby had another token of Morales' courage when he saw him glance at the hemmed in priests with a little sardonic smile.

He made a sign with his gloved hand, somebody called out sharply, a line of men moved forward a pace or two, and there was a jingle and clatter as the rifles went up to the hip. Appleby saw the lame lad shrink back towards the wall, and one of the peons with bound hands awkwardly pull forward his hat over his eyes, but the other stood bolt upright with his at his side.

Once more a voice rang sharply through the stillness, the rifles went up to the shoulder, and Appleby, who set his lips and clenched his hands, turned his eyes aside. For a second or two it was horribly and intensely still, and then a hoarse, strained voice, one of the peons' Appleby fancied, cried, "Viva la libertad!"

It was followed by a crash, a whisp of smoke drifted past him, there was an inarticulate cry from the crowd, and he dimly saw the firing party moving through the smoke. Beyond them he had a blurred glimpse of a figure that swayed upon its knees, and another lying full length clawing at the stones. Then he shivered and gazed up at the crowded house-tops and dazzling sky, and by a grim effort held himself stiffly erect. Harper's voice reached him through the murmur of horror from the crowd.

"Lord!" he said hoarsely. "They've bungled it!"

Again the rifles crashed, and the men came back, two of them, Appleby noticed, walking a trifle unsteadily. The faces of the rest were set and grim, and he braced himself for an effort as the man with the paper moved forward again. His turn and Harper's was coming now, but what he had seen had stirred him to a fierce anger that drove out physical fear, and it was impotent fury he strove to hold in check. Then he saw

RESPITED

Morales apparently conferring with one or two of his officers who seemed to be glancing towards him and Harper, while the latter gripped his shoulder until he winced.

"Why can't they be quick?" he said. "I'll take one of those soldiers' rifles and empty the magazine into them in another minute."

Then there was a louder hum of voices and a surging of the crowd, for the men of the firing party, waiting no order, brought their rifles down with a crash. They were young men of the Barremeda company, which, as Appleby had heard, was not above suspicion, though that was, perhaps, why Morales had appointed them the task. A lieutenant appeared to be gesticulating in front of them, but the men stood immovable, with ordered rifles and set brown faces, and there was now a murmur from the ranks behind them, while a great cry went up from the crowd.

Santa Marta was a loyalist town, that is, the men who had anything to lose supported the rule of Spain, but they were for that reason mostly men of position and refinement, and what they had seen had proved almost too much for them. The rest who had nothing were, for the most part, insurgents at heart, even if they refrained from actively expressing their sympathies, which was not certain, and the last cry of the butchered peon coupled with the affront put upon the priests had stirred them to fury. When the hot Iberian blood takes fire events are apt to happen somewhat rapidly, and Morales, it seemed, had gone a trifle too far.

He flung himself from the saddle, and moved forward with gleaming sword, which he brandished in front of the flank man of the firing party, but the set faces were resolutely turned upon him, and now the brown fingers were convulsively tightening on the rifles. The tumult was growing louder, and shouts of "Libertad!" and "Viva la revolucion!" came out of the clamor. In one place the double line of men with bayonets bent in, and a section of the Barremeda company broke their ranks.

"Lord!" said Harper hoarsely. "With ten of the Sin Verguenza I'd take Santa Marta now."

It was not altogether an empty boast. The Iberian is impulsive and unstable, and a word spoken in season will stir to any rashness a Latin crowd. The troops were disaffected,

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

part of them, at least, openly mutinous, but Morales the Sword could grapple with a crisis. He was in the saddle in a moment, his voice rang clear and commanding above the tumult, and the men who wavered, uncertain what course to take, obeyed. The ranks wheeled, broke up, and grouped again in fours, the bugles rang shrilly, there was a roll of drums, and almost before Appleby quite realized what was happening the head of the leading company was filing out of the plaza, and Morales' swift decision had saved the situation. Then a man touched Appleby's shoulder, and he and Harper and another man stepped into an opening between the files.

"You are to be felicitated. There are few who offend Morales he does not crush," said the sergeant of the guard.

Appleby made no answer. He was a trifle dazed, and his thoughts were in a whirl, but he noticed vacantly that there was a curious portentous silence as the troops marched back to the cuartel, and was glad when they reached it and he and Harper were thrust into the same room again. He sat down, somewhat limply, on the floor.

"It was a trifle horrible—and I'm sorry we drank all the wine. Still, of course, no one could have guessed," he said.

He felt that his face was a little colorless, for his forehead was clammy and his lips were cold, but Harper's was flushed, and he paced up and down the room until he stopped in front of Appleby.

Then he said hoarsely, "I had a notion. That man never meant to wipe us out to-day. We were to taste death, and live with the grit crushed out of us, because he figured we would be of some use to him. If I could get my hands on him I'd kill him."

Appleby had felt much the same anger, but he was calmer now. What he had witnessed had filled him with horror, and while he could have blamed Morales little for his sentence, since his life was a risk of the game, the attempt to crush his manhood by making him taste the anguish of death was unforgivable and an abomination.

"Well," he said very quietly, "our turn may come."

Harper once more strode up and down the room, and then stopped abruptly with a little laugh. "It's kind of senseless

RESPITED

talking just now," he said. "We're not going to worry Morales much while he has got us here. I wonder if anybody will remember to bring us our dinner."

Appleby smiled, and the tension relaxed, but his hands were trembling, and it cost him two or three matches to light the cigar Harper threw him.

XXV

MORALES SITS STILL

IT was late at night when Appleby, who felt no inclination for sleep, looked out into the soft darkness from a window of the cuartel where he had now passed six anxious days. Here and there a light blinked dimly in the gulf of blacker shadow that marked the narrow street beneath him, for there was no moon that night, and the steamy dampness the faint warm wind drove before it obscured the stars. A hot, musky smell rose from the silent town.

Still, Appleby, who had keen eyes, fancied he had seen a shadowy form pass twice beneath the nearest light, and then turn as though looking up at the cuartel, and he called Harper softly when it appeared again.

"Can you make out that man?" he said. "This is the third time I have seen him. It is noticeable that he shows himself just under the lamp."

"Well," said Harper reflectively, "I guess you wouldn't have seen him anywhere else."

The shadowy form slipped away into the obscurity, and there was silence for at least five minutes while the pair stood very still, wondering with a vague sense of expectation what it meant, until Appleby said sharply, "There he is again."

"No," said Harper. "That's another one. He's taller, and, so far as I can make out, dressed quite different. Still, he's looking up. It seems to me he means us or somebody else to see him."

Appleby felt his heart throb, and his voice was not quite steady as he said, "Morales has, at least, a half-company in the cuartel."

"Well," said Harper, "I don't quite know. He sent most of the Barremedas away — though there's a section or two

MORALES SITS STILL

here still. They are the men that showed signs of kicking in the plaza, and it's quite likely he figures they'd be safer with Vincente's Peninsular battalion. Then counting up the pickets, outposts, and patrols he'll have on the carretera, there'll scarcely be forty men in this barracks now."

Appleby nodded. "Perhaps you are right," he said. "I have been wondering why nothing has apparently happened to the section which ordered arms. Morales is not the man to let a thing of that kind pass."

Harper was quite aware that his comrade had little interest in the question, and surmised that he desired to conceal the fact that the appearance of the man below had stirred him to a state of tense expectancy.

"No," he said. "Still, I guess he has quite a good reason for holding his hand, and those cazadores will be sorry for themselves when he's through with them. He'll keep them wondering where he's going to hit them until it grinds all the grit out of them, and then start in."

He stopped somewhat abruptly at the sound of feet on the stairway, and had his hand on the lattice when a soldier came in. It was evident that he noticed the half-closed window, and he looked at them curiously.

"The Colonel Morales sends for you," he said, and though there was apparently nobody within hearing dropped his voice a little. "If he asks you questions let him wait for your answer. It is necessary that you should keep him talking at least ten minutes."

Appleby felt a little quiver run through him, and saw that Harper's face had grown suddenly intent.

"Why?" he asked.

The man made a little gesture expressive of indecision. "The guard is changed then—and who knows what may happen? The men who come on duty are my comrades of the Barremedas—and they are afraid. This Morales is most terrible in his quietness. There is also below a merchant of tobacco."

Appleby saw the sudden sparkle in Harper's eyes, but he put a strong constraint upon himself, for he dared not hope too much. He knew Maccario's daring, but it was difficult to believe that he would venture into the cuartel where there were men who could scarcely fail to recognize him. Still, he

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

remembered the signs of disaffection among the troops, and that Cuba was steeped in intrigue.

"We are ready," he said very quietly.

The soldier signed to them, and they followed him — down the outer stairway, and up another, along a corridor where two guards were stationed, and into a room where their guide, who raised his hand and swung round, left them. The room was small, with one lattice in it that apparently opened on to the street and not the patio, and Morales sat alone, with his sword and kepi on the table before him, which was littered with papers. He looked up with expressionless eyes, and then while they stood quivering a little with suspense went on writing for the space of four minutes by the clock behind him. Appleby, who understood his purpose, felt that this would count for a good deal if ever there was a reckoning between them, but seeing the flush of passion in Harper's lean face he once more put a grim constraint upon himself. Knowing the Castilian temperament he also fancied that at this game he could hold his own with Morales. At last the soldier shook a little sand over what he had written, and carefully cleaned his pen before he turned to them.

"It seemed to me you might have concluded that the decision you made was a trifle hasty, Señor Appleby," he said.

"You gave me no opportunity of changing it," said Appleby as quietly as he could, though he realized that his voice was not quite his usual one. "In any case I do not see what I gain. We are under sentence, and one has usually a motive for what he does in Cuba."

Morales glanced at him steadily with keen dark eyes, and Appleby wondered whether he had assumed too great an eagerness by suggesting that he might be willing to treat with a man who had hitherto found him obdurate. Then the officer smiled.

"It is evident that the man who passed the sentence could commute it," he said.

Appleby appeared to reflect. He did not know what was going on below, but he desired at least to hold Morales' attention until the change of the guard.

"Of course!" he said. "Still, he had apparently no intention of doing so. It seems to me we are under no obligation to Colonel Morales in one respect."

MORALES SITS STILL

"No?" and Morales' smile was sardonic.

Appleby shook his head. "I fancy that we owe rather more to certain disaffected cazadores," he said. "That little display was, of course, unexpected."

He saw the dark eyes flash, but next moment the officer's face was once more expressionless.

"One cannot foresee everything, but I think there will not be another display of the kind," he said. "Well, I will make an admission. Would it astonish you to hear that, in spite of the sentence, it was not intended that you should face the firing party?"

Appleby, who heard a soft crunching under his comrade's foot, glanced at him warningly. Harper's eyes were glowing, and the fingers of one hand were tightly clenched, but meeting Appleby's gaze he controlled himself.

"One would not presume to question the word of Colonel Morales," said Appleby with rather more than a trace of irony. "In this case there was also the fact that your distinguished countrymen have already incurred a serious responsibility. Spain cannot afford to offer any unnecessary provocation to two other nations just now."

The contempt in Morales' little laugh was not assumed. "Pshaw! It is evident you do not understand the Castilians, Señor Appleby. One would almost fancy that you were trifling with me."

"I am afraid you rate my courage too high," said Appleby, who glanced at the clock. "It is, however, difficult to decide. The thing suggested was unpleasant, and you understand that one has prejudices. Perhaps that is because I have not lived very long in Cuba. Still, I admit that what we saw in the plaza was suggestive, but there is the difficulty that I cannot commit my comrade, who may have different notions."

Once more Morales fixed his dark eyes upon him, and Appleby, who could feel his heart throbbing, wondered if he had blundered in not assuming at least a trace of anxiety. He fancied that Morales must suspect that there was something behind his indifferent attitude, but, tingling with suspense as he was, the rôle was very difficult to play. It was essential that he should lead the officer on with the hope of making terms until the guard was changed. The minute

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

finger of the little clock scarcely seemed to move, while he could feel that the damp was beaded on his forehead.

Morales, however, laughed. "I fancy he could be left to you. Still, I wished him to hear — that he should know whom he was indebted to in case we did not arrive at an understanding. Well, I will be frank. We will assume that the offer I made you is open still."

Appleby stood silent for almost half a minute, which appeared interminable, feeling that Morales' eyes never left his face. Then there was a tramp of feet in the patio, followed by a tread on the stairway, and it was only by strenuous effort that he retained his immobility. The guard was being changed a minute or two earlier than he had expected.

A voice rose from outside, somebody tapped at the door, and Morales appeared to check an exclamation of impatience when a man came in. He was dressed immaculately in white linen and spotless duck, and carried a costly Panama hat in his hand.

"With many excuses, señor, I venture to do myself this honor," he said. "You may remember you were once pleased to express your approbation of my poor tobacco."

Appleby contrived to smile, though it cost him an effort, but Harper gasped, and there was for a moment a silence they both found it difficult to bear. Appleby in the meanwhile saw the gleam in Morales' eyes, but was quite aware that a Castilian gentleman rates his own dignity too highly to consider it necessary to impress it upon every stranger.

"It is an intrusion," he said quietly. "I do not understand why the sentries admitted you."

The tobacco merchant made a little deprecatory gesture, and Appleby felt his hands tremble as he watched the man move a step nearer the officer's chair.

"It was not their fault. I slipped by when the guard was changed," he said. "One would make excuses for such boldness, but you understand the necessities of business. Now, I have here examples of a most excellent tobacco."

Morales turned, apparently to summon one of the guards. "Still, the man who let you pass will be sorry!"

Then there was a little click-clack that sounded horribly distinct, and as he swung round again a pistol glinted in the tobacco merchant's hand.

MORALES SITS STILL

"Señor," said the latter, "it would be advisable to sit very still."

Morales became suddenly rigid, but his eyes were very steady as he glanced at the stranger. "One begins to understand," he said. "Are you not, however, a little indiscreet, señor? There is a guard scarcely thirty feet away. A sound also travels far in this building."

The tobacco merchant laughed. "Will you open the door, Señor Harper, that Colonel Morales may see his guard?"

Harper rose, and when he flung the door open the sentry was revealed. He stood in the corridor gazing into the lighted room, but though the situation must have been evident to him, his face was expressionless, and his erect figure showed motionless against the shadow behind him. Then for just a moment a flush of darker color swept into Morales' olive cheek, and Appleby fancied that he winced.

"That man is taking a heavy risk," he said. "There is a half-company of his comrades in the cuartel."

The tobacco merchant smiled. "Then one would fancy, señor, that some of them had mutinied."

Morales said nothing for a moment, and Appleby surmised that he was wondering how many of his men had remained loyal. Then he made a little impatient gesture.

"Well," he said, "what do you want from me?"

"A very little thing, señor. No more than the liberty of a certain peon, Domingo Pereira. I do not ask the freedom of these friends of mine. That, as you can comprehend, is unnecessary."

A little gleam crept into the officer's dark eyes. "It is a trifle difficult to understand why you place yourself under an obligation to me in respect to the peon Pereira. If there is a mutiny in the cuartel, why not take him?"

"It is simple. The affair is one that we wish to arrange quietly, but there are one or two sections who will take no part with us, and the Sergeant Suarez is an obdurate loyalist. All we ask is an order for the handing over of the prisoner to the guard. That, since it will not be known when they mutinied, will cast no discredit upon the Colonel Morales."

"And if I should not think fit to sign it?"

The tobacco merchant shrugged his shoulders. "One would recommend you to reflect," he said. "Between two Spanish

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

gentlemen who have no wish for unpleasantness that should be sufficient. Still, you see before you three determined men, and you have proof that your guard has mutinied. It is convenient that you write the order."

"You want nothing more?"

"No, señor. To be frank, my friends have no intention of seizing the cuartel. We are not in a position to hold it just now."

Morales tore a strip of paper from a pad, scribbled upon it, and flung it across the table to the tobacco merchant, who passed it to Appleby.

"You will hand that to the soldier outside," he said. "He will come back and report when he has delivered the prisoner to the guard."

Appleby went out, and the tobacco merchant laid the pistol down. "It was an unpleasant necessity," he said. "Still, one can dispense with it now we have arrived at an understanding."

Harper laughed as he clenched his big hands on the back of the chair he leaned upon.

"If the distinguished gentleman tries to get up something will happen to him," he said. "I have been figuring just where I could get him with the leg of this."

Morales made a little gesture of disgust. "The Señor Harper does not understand us. One has objections to anything unseemly, señor. I have a fancy that I have seen you in other places than the hacienda San Cristoval."

"In Alturas Pass—and elsewhere," said the tobacco merchant with a smile. "I once had the honor of meeting the Colonel Morales in the street below us. At that time he had a sword in his hand."

Morales' face grew very grim, but he held himself in hand. "Yes. I remember now," he said. "The leader of the Sin Verguenza—Don Maccario?"

The tobacco merchant made him a little half-ironical inclination. "Colonel Morales will appreciate the consideration I have shown him in coming myself," he said. "The affair might have been arranged differently had I sent one or two of my men who have a little account with him."

Morales said nothing, and there was silence for a space of minutes. What he thought was not apparent, for though his

MORALES SITS STILL

color was a trifle darker now, he sat rigidly still, but Appleby felt himself quivering a little, and saw that Harper's lips were grimly set, while Maccario moved the fingers of one hand in a curious nervous fashion. Appleby scarcely dared wonder what was happening in the patio, though he surmised that if the Sergeant Suarez questioned the order it would go very hard with all of them, for there were, he remembered, fifty men in the cuartel, and only a handful of them had mutinied. He could feel his heart beating, and anathematized the loquaciousness of Maccario and his deference to Castilian decorum which had kept them so long. It was evident to him that any trifling unexpected difficulty would result in their destruction. At last, when every nerve in him was tingling, a man came hastily up the stairway.

"We have Domingo Pereira," he said. "The others are getting impatient, señor!"

Maccario rose and turned to Morales. "Take warning, señor. No one is safe from the Sin Verguenza, and we may not extend you as much consideration when we next meet," he said. "In the meanwhile I ask your word on the faith of a soldier of Spain that you will sit here silent for the next ten minutes."

Again Morales' eyes gleamed. "Now," he said ironically, "comes your difficulty. I will promise nothing — and a pistol is noisy. I am not sure about the extent of the mutiny."

Maccario very suggestively shook his sleeve. "In this country one carries a little implement which is silent and effective, but there is another means of obviating the difficulty. This sash of mine is of ample length and spun from the finest silk, though one would not care to subject a distinguished officer to an indignity."

"Take it off," said Harper. "I'll fix him so half his caza-dores could n't untie him. You're not going to take his word he'll sit there."

Maccario stopped him with a gesture, and turned to Morales. "It would, it seems, be wiser to promise, señor. We ask no more than ten minutes."

For a moment the officer's olive face became suffused, but the blood ebbed from it, leaving it almost pale, and it was very quietly he pledged himself. Then they turned and left him, and Harper gasped when they went out into the corridor.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"Well," he said shortly, "I don't want to go through anything like that again. It was 'most as hard as what happened in the plaza, and it seems to me the sooner we light out of this place the better."

In another minute they reached the great patio, where a handful of men in uniform were eagerly waiting them. They formed about the released prisoners, and one of them ironically saluted the loyalist sentry who sat in his box with a cloth bound about his head as they passed out into the silent street. The hot walls flung back the tramp of their feet with a horrible distinctness, but the citizen of Santa Marta had grown accustomed to the passing of the rounds, and when Maccario, stopping beneath a light, pulled out his watch they were close to the outside of the town.

"Haste would be advisable, I think," he said.

Then they broke into a run, but Maccario swung round as they sped down a street and flung himself into a shadowy patio. They swept through it into an open door, and out through one at the back of the building, while Appleby gasped with relief as he found himself in a garden with the town at last behind him.

Maccario laughed a little as he touched his shoulder. "There is a path here," he said. "The Sin Verguenza have friends everywhere."

They were quickly clear of the garden, and as they blundered through a grove of trees shadowy objects clustered about them, while when Maccario stopped again there appeared to be a swarm of them. A growing clamor, through which the ringing of the bugles came stridently, rose from the town.

"We will stop and adopt a convenient formation," he said. "You will, I think, find a few of your friends here, Don Bernardino. It is scarcely likely that Morales will risk a pursuit in the darkness."

"If anybody had told me he would have sat there because he promised I guess I would n't have believed him," said Harper.

Maccario laughed. "There is apparently still a little you do not understand," he said. "That is a great rascal, but he is also a brave soldier and a Castilian gentleman. Had he not known his own value to Spain it is conceivable that —"

MORALES SITS STILL

He stopped with a little expressive gesture, and Harper felt something very like a shiver run through him. He, however, said nothing further, but took his place among the rest, for already Appleby was forming the men. Then marching silently they swung through the tobacco fields until they came out upon the carretera that led to San Cristoval.

XXVI

THE SEIZING OF SAN CRISTOVAL.

FOR a time the tramp of marching feet throbbed softly along the carretera that wound, a black thread of shadow, through the dusky cane. The dust was clogged with moisture and deadened the sound, while the Sin Verguenza were not shod after the fashion of British infantry. Some of them, indeed, wore no shoes at all, and as he watched the dim, half-seen figures flit almost silently through the night Appleby could have fancied he was marching with a company of shadows through a land of dreams.

The sensation was, however, by no means new to him. He had felt it now and then before on a long night march when the mind, as it were, released itself from the domination of the worn-out, but it was plainer now than it had ever been. He had during the last few days been living under a heavy strain, and now there crowded upon him vague perplexing fancies and elusive memories which he could almost believe had been transmitted him by the soldiers whose blood was in his veins. It was only by an effort that, plodding along with half-closed eyes, he shook them off and roused himself to attention. Shadowy men moved on into the blackness in front of him, and more were winding out of the gloom behind. Now and then a clump of palms went by, showing a mere patch of obscurity against the clouded sky, and where the road was harder the beat of weary feet rang through the silence hollowly. He did not feel drowsy, but wondered if he was wholly awake when he heard Harper's voice beside him.

" You seem kind of quiet. I guess you 're thinking hard," he said.

" No," said Appleby, with a little laugh. " I could scarcely remember clearly what happened yesterday. I don't know, however, that I want to especially."

THE SEIZING OF SAN CRISTOVAL

"Well," said Harper reflectively, "it must be the same kind of thing that is wrong with me. My thoughts keep going round in rings, and bring up at the same place every time, as though somebody had put a peg in. I can see that peon in the plaza clawing at the stones, and the cazadores standing still with ordered rifles. That seems to slide away, and it's the 'Maine' going under, bows down. I was n't there, but the big swirl in the water is quite plain to me, and I can see the bodies coming up through the green heave by twos and threes. Then I wonder how I came away from the cuartel and left Morales sitting there, and I want to live until I meet him, when he is n't alone, again."

His voice sank into a faint hoarse murmur that was more significant than any declamation, but Appleby, who had his own score against Morales, said nothing. He felt that a time would come when he and the Spanish soldier would once more stand face to face, and that to let his vindictive passions run riot in the meanwhile would be puerile. Then Maccario's voice came sharply across the wavering rifles, and the shuffle of feet grew still. There was a murmur of voices until the head of the column moved again, and the men who left the carretera plodded along a narrow pathway and then flung themselves down among the cane, while Appleby, who did not quite know how he got there, found himself sitting in a little open space with Maccario and two or three of the leaders. There was blackness and silence about them.

"Morales will wait until the dawn," said Maccario. "We have taught him that one gains little by chasing the Sin Verguenza at night, and the men have marched a long way. We will seize the hacienda when the light is just creeping into the sky."

"There are troops there?" asked Appleby.

"A section or two. Morales is a clever man, but one is apt to believe what one wishes to, and it is some little time since he drove out the Sin Verguenza."

"He has spies," said Appleby.

Maccario laughed softly. "It is dangerous to spy upon the Sin Verguenza, and there are men who go out and are not seen again. One also brings a tale of what he has not seen now and then, and when one has friends everywhere it is not diffi-

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

cult to contrive that the cazadores shall find reasons why Morales should believe him."

"Pancho brought you my message?" said Appleby.

"Next day. He came in staggering. It was a long way, and a mule could scarcely have made the journey faster. Another man came, but where the rest are I do not know. Perhaps the pickets saw them, and they are lying among the cane. It was, however, morning when I had gathered thirty men, and I knew you were in Santa Marta then. We moved slowly until another thirty came up with me, but one could not assault the cuartel with sixty men. So we scattered, and the Sin Verguenza hid where the patrols would not find them, while a merchant of tobacco who has friends there came into Santa Marta. He saw what was happening, and how one might profit by Morales' little blunder."

"I don't quite understand," said Appleby. "Only a handful of men had actually mutinied."

"Morales would have shot them, only he is cunning, and had seen the temper of the people. A dead man cannot feel, but one can hold fear over a living one until he crushes him, and those cazadores knew what to expect. One can, however, be too cunning, my friend."

"The men could have deserted."

"It is also conceivable that, in spite of the pickets, you could have got out of San Cristoval, but what then? There is only the cane to hide in, starving, until the patrols find one. It was when they heard the Sin Verguenza were coming the affair became simple."

"Still, they shot three of your friends."

Maccario's voice sank a little. "That is counted to Morales, and they will have the opportunity of doing a good deal for us in an hour or two. There will be no fighting when we occupy San Cristoval. Comes a patrol with an order from Morales, and no one is very alert at that hour. The patrol is admitted, there is a seizing of rifles, and the Sin Verguenza, who have crept up behind, are in. With a little contrivance there is no difficulty."

"One could hold the hacienda with sixty men."

Maccario laughed. "With six hundred one could be sure; and in a few weeks we shall have a battalion, for our time is coming soon. When the American troops have landed

THE SEIZING OF SAN CRISTOVAL

there will be work for those of Spain. You have our felicitations on your clear sight, Don Bernardino. A little thing makes a quarrel when the suspicion and the dislike are there."

There was a murmur from the rest, and Harper stood up among the cane.

"A little thing!" he said hoarsely. "The devils sunk the 'Maine'!"

Appleby said nothing. He was worn out and limp from the strain, and fancied he must have gone to sleep, for when he was next conscious of anything the men about him had risen to their feet. It was a little lighter, and a faint cool breeze was blowing, while he shivered as he stood up with his thin damp garments clinging to his limbs.

Maccario spoke sharply, there was a shuffling of feet, and before Appleby quite realized what was happening the Sin Verguenza were once more plodding down the road to San Cristoval. Then he shook the stiffness and lassitude from him, and braced himself to face the work on hand. Maccario's plan might fail, and he knew it would in that case be no easy task to drive Morales' cazadores out of the hacienda. The sleep had, however, refreshed him, the vague memories had vanished, and his head was clear, while a faint sense of exhilaration came upon him. There was something inspiriting in the tramp of feet that grew brisker now, and in the thin musical jingle of steel. He had, for what seemed a very long time, played a risky game alone, and it was a relief to face actual visible peril with trusty comrades about him and a good rifle in his hand.

By and by there was another brief stoppage, and the handful of cazadores went on alone when the rest plunged into a path among the cane. Maccario, it was evident, did not care to take the risk of blundering upon a picket, and a man led them by twisting paths until at last the hacienda rose blackly before them. Appleby could see it dimly, a blur of shadowy buildings with the ridge of roof parapet alone cutting hard and sharp against the clearing sky. Beyond it rose the gaunt chimney of the sugar mill, a vague spire of blackness that ran up into the night, but though a few lights blinked in the lower windows there was no sound from the house. The men were standing silent and impassively still, so that he could scarcely

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

distinguish them from the cane, but he made out Maccario a few paces away from him.

"We will have to wait. It is farther by the road," he said. "Can you trust the cazadores? They have already deserted one leader."

Maccario seemed to laugh. "They know what to expect from Morales. It would, of course, not be difficult to warn their comrades, but what then? Comes a sergeant to Morales with a tale that they have led the Sin Verguenza into a trap. Morales is not likely to be grateful, or place much value on the men who change their masters twice in one night. Still, one takes precautions in Cuba, and while they trample down the road a few men who wear no shoes follow close behind them. Then if there is to be another change it is not the cazadores who will walk into the trap."

Appleby said nothing. He had been afforded another glimpse of the complex Spanish character, which is marked by an intellectual astuteness and a swift cunning that is beyond the attainment of the average Englishman or American, and yet rarely avails the Castilian much when pitted against them. He had seen enough in Cuba to realize that it was seldom shortsighted folly and never lack of valor that had blighted the hopes of Spain, but the apathy and indecision when the eventful moment came, and the instability which when the consummation was almost brought about not infrequently changed the plan. Nor were there many Iberians or Cubans like Maccario who seldom overlooked the trifles that make the difference.

The latter made a little sign with his lifted hand, there was a low rustling, and the Sin Verguenza had vanished among the cane. Appleby smiled as he flung himself down, and realized that a battalion of cazadores might march past without seeing one of them. Then the soft rustling and crackling died away, and it became very still. There was no sound yet from the tram-line which ran between them and the hacienda, and he began to wonder how long the cazadores sent on would be, or if they had after all deceived their new friends and eluded the vigilance of those who watched them. The latter, however, appeared very improbable. In the meanwhile the sky was growing a little lighter, the buildings blacker and sharper in outline, while there was a faint illusory brightness in the east.

THE SEIZING OF SAN CRISTOVÁL

Still, no sound rose from the hacienda, and there was only silence upon the unseen carretera.

Then he started as a faint rhythmic throbbing came out of it. It suggested marching feet, and grew louder while he listened, until he heard the men stumbling among the sleepers of the tram-line. Maccario said something, and the Sin Ver-guenza moved in nearer the building by little paths among the cane, while when they stopped again Appleby found himself on the verge of the tram-line with the outer wall of the hacienda close in front of him. A few shadowy objects that stumbled among the sleepers were growing into visibility a little farther along the line. They stopped and stood still a moment when a hoarse shout rose from the building, and then moved on again when somebody flung them a low warning from amidst the cane. Then they stopped close in front of the gate of the patio, and Appleby felt a little quiver run through him as he heard the question of the sentry.

The voice of the man who answered reached him distinctly.

"Friends. Orders from the cuartel! We have come from Santa Marta, and it is a long way. Let us in."

There was another question, and an answer. The big iron grille grated on its hinges as it swung open, and Appleby fancied that one dim figure detached itself from the rest as they disappeared into the patio. Discipline is seldom unnecessarily rigid among the troops of Spain, and it was not astonishing that a man should stop a moment and speak to the sentry.

Then for a minute or two there was a silence. Now and then a man moved amidst the cane, and the low rustling sounded horribly distinct, but while Appleby wondered what was taking place within the hacienda Maccario touched his shoulder, and rising softly he slipped across the tram-line and into the gloom beneath the high wall, with Harper and a cluster of crouching men close behind him. Moving circumspectly they crept forward nearer the gate, until there was a shout from the sentry followed by a struggle and the sound of a fall, and a man stood in the opening shouting to them.

Then they went on at a run, and sprang through the gate, stumbling over a man who crawled out from among their feet. There was a clamor in a lighted room close by, and a pistol shot rang out. Then a rifle flashed, and as they swept in

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

through a doorway a wisp of acrid smoke met them in the face. They had a brief glimpse of a few figures in uniform flying through another door, and two men who stood alone in a corner with the mutinous *cazadores* in front of them. One of the latter was by his emphatic gestures apparently urging them to consider the recommendation he was making.

The two men, however, stood grimly still, one, who was young and slim, with delicate olive-tinted face and the blue eyes one finds now and then among the Castilians, clenching a big pistol, while the dusky, grizzled sergeant beside him held a rifle at his hip. A little blue smoke was still curling from the muzzle, and a man with a red smear growing broader down one leg sat looking at him stupidly in the middle of the room. Appleby grasped the meaning of the scene at a glance, and then he was driven forward as the *Sin Verguenza* poured into the room. Harper sprang past him.

"It's the fellow I hove over the balustrade at the *café*," he said. "You've got no use for that pistol, *señor*."

There was a bright flash, and a flake of plaster fell from the wall close behind Appleby's shoulder, but even as the brown fingers tightened on the trigger again Harper gripped the young officer. He hove him bodily off his feet, and there was a yell from the *Sin Verguenza* as he flung him upon the grizzled sergeant. The man staggered, and the pair went down heavily in the corner. Then Harper, who tore one of his comrade's rifles away from him, stood in front of them.

"I guess you had better keep moving in case the rest light out," he said.

There was an angry murmur, and though some of the men had already swept through the room the rest stared at Harper, who grinned at them.

"Well," he said, "it's not your fault you're not Americans. Rustle. Hay prisa. Adelante! Tell them I'll put this contract through, Appleby."

Those of the *Sin Verguenza* who had remained appeared a trifle undecided, until Appleby, who had no desire to witness a purposeless piece of butchery, joined his comrade. Then, with the exception of two or three, they turned and went out to head off any of the defenders who might escape by an outer window from the tram-line. Appleby secured the officer's pistol, while Harper, apparently with no great effort,

THE SEIZING OF SAN CRISTOVÁL

dragged him to his feet, and holding him by the shoulder gravely looked him over.

"Well," he said in English, and his voice expressed approbation, "you have grit in you. Now stand still a little. Nobody's going to hurt you."

The young officer's face was dark with passion, but he writhed futilely in his captor's grasp, while the sergeant, who stood up, handed Appleby his rifle.

"Tell him not to wriggle," said Harper, grinning. "Oh, let up, you senseless devil!"

Then while the Sin Verguenza laughed he backed his captive against the wall and gravely proceeded to pull his tunic straight and dust him. When this had been accomplished to his satisfaction he stepped back a pace or two, and surveyed his work smiling.

"There's not much harm done, señor," he said. "Now, I felt it would have been a pleasure to shake the life out of you a minute or two ago."

The officer stared at him in blank astonishment, and then looked at the sergeant, who gravely laid a finger on his forehead.

"They are born that way, these Americans," he said.

The officer made a curious little gesture, and would apparently have unbuckled his sword, but while the men of the Sin Verguenza, unstable even in their fierceness, laughed, Harper seized him by the shoulder, and, signing to the sergeant, propelled him violently to the door.

"Out you go while you've got the chance!" he said in English.

The officer turned, and stood still a moment as though undecided, and then vanished into the night, while in another second the sergeant sprang after him. Appleby laughed as he turned to Harper.

"I scarcely fancy that was wise," he said. "We could have kept him to play off against any of our men who fall into Morales' hands."

"Well," said Harper reflectively, "I don't quite know why I let him go, but he had grit in him, and it seemed to me that if I had n't let up on taking a life or two after getting out of the plaza in Santa Marta it would have been mean of me. Anyway, I don't figure we'd have kept him. He has the

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

kind of temper that would have stirred up the Sin Verguenza into sticking knives in him."

Appleby nodded gravely, for he was astonished at very little that Harper did, while though the big skipper's sentiments were crude there was something in his vague notion of a thank-offering that appealed to his fancy. Then Maccario came in.

"The cazadores have left two men behind, but the rest got away, except a few who submitted," he said. "We will find a place in the stables for them. It will induce Morales to be more considerate with his prisoners."

Appleby told him about the officer. "It was perhaps a blunder, but we can afford it just now," he said.

Maccario's face grew a trifle grim, but in another moment he made a little gesture of resignation.

"If it was the wish of the Señor Harper! It is sometimes a trifle difficult to understand an American," he said. "Now if we can find any peons they shall cut the cane back from the hacienda. Morales will be here in two or three hours with at least a company."

XXVII

HARDING'S APPROBATION

THE red sunrise found the Sin Verguenza already toiling with fierce activity about the hacienda. This was significant, because they were not addicted to unnecessary physical effort, but they had reasons for knowing it was advisable for the men who incurred the displeasure of Morales to take precautions, and the cane that rolled close up to the hacienda would in case of an assault afford convenient cover to the cazadores. It went down crackling before the flashing steel, while the perspiration dripped from swarthy faces, and the men gasped as they toiled. Appleby, who stripped himself to shirt and trousers before an hour had passed, wondered how long his arms, unused to labor, would stand the strain as he strove to keep pace with the men he led. Harper, almost naked, led another band, and stirred up the spirit of rivalry by rude badinage in barbarous Castilian. It was characteristic that both found the stress of physical effort bracing, and Macario, attired in hat of costly Panama and spotless duck, watched them with a little twinkle in his dark eyes. There were, he said, sufficient men to do the work without him, and no gentleman of Iberian extraction toiled with his hands unless it was imperatively necessary.

Pickets came in and took up the machetes, gasping men, dripping with perspiration, flung themselves down in the shadow until their turn came again, the sun climbed higher until it was almost overhead, and the juice exuded hot upon the toilers' hands from the crackling stems, while the faint breeze seemed to have passed through a furnace, and the brightness was bewildering.

Still, while the space where the stalks stood scarcely knee-high widened rapidly there was no sign of Morales, and the men grew silent, and now and then cast wondering glances at one another. They had expected the cazadores several hours ago, and their uneasiness was made apparent by the stoppages

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

that grew more frequent while they gazed across the cane. Morales was, as they knew, not a man who wasted time, and his dilatoriness troubled them, for they felt certain that he would come.

The hour of the *siesta* arrived, and it was hotter than ever and dazzlingly bright, but no one laid his machete down; and Appleby's hands were bleeding, while his head reeled as he staggered towards the tram-line with great bundles of cane. Morales, it seemed evident, was hatching some cunning plan for their destruction, and though arms and backs ached intolerably they toiled on. It was not until the hour of the *comida* they desisted, and by then sufficient cane had been cut to leave a space round the hacienda that would be perilous for the cazadores to cross, and those of the Sin Verguenza who had magazine rifles surveyed it with grim complacency. Then bags of soil were placed here and there along the parapet of the roof and piled behind the patio gate, and the men trooped in to eat. When Morales came they would at least be in a position to welcome him fittingly.

Still, he did not come, and when the shadows of the building which lay long and black across the cleared space crept into the growing cane a man walked into the patio. Pancho led him up to where Appleby and Maccario sat upon the roof gazing across the green plain towards the wavy thread of *carretera*.

"There is little news, señor," he said. "Morales sits close in Santa Marta and has drawn his outposts in. One is not allowed to go into or out of the city without a pass, and the civiles watch the wine-shops."

Maccario appeared thoughtful, but Appleby said, "You had a pass?"

The man shrugged his shoulders. "It is not always necessary — to me, but as it happens, I have two or three. There are little persuasive tricks known to the friends of liberty, and one can now and then induce a loyal citizen to part with his."

"In Cuba one does not suggest too much," said Maccario dryly. "Your good offices will be remembered when we have taken Santa Marta. There are dollars in that city, and they are scarce just now at San Cristoval. Morales has been here, you understand. In the meanwhile it is likely that Don Pancho will find you a bottle of wine and a little *comida*."

HARDING'S APPROBATION

The man withdrew, and Maccario contemplated the cigar he lighted. "There is a good deal I do not understand," he said. "Morales does nothing without a motive, and it is quite certain he is not afraid. There is, however, a little defect in his character which has its importance to us."

"One would fancy that there were several," said Appleby.

Maccario smiled, and showed himself, like most men of his nationality, willing to moralize. "Strength comes with unity of purpose," he said. "I am, as an example, anxious only to do what I can to promote Cuban independence, and a very little on behalf of a certain patriot Maccario. The latter, you understand, is permissible, and almost a duty. Morales, one admits, has at heart the upholding of Spanish domination, and it is at least as certain that any opportunity of profiting one Morales is seized by him. It would not, however, become me to censure him, but the defect is this — Morales always remembers the man who has injured him."

"One would fancy it was a shortcoming which is not unknown among the Sin Verguenza!"

Maccario made a little gesture. "In reason, it is scarcely a defect, but with Morales it is a passion which is apt to betray into indiscretions a man who should have nothing at heart but the good of his country and the good of himself."

"I think I understand. You mean — "

"That Morales will endeavor to crush us even if he knows it will cost him a good deal. Cuba is not large enough for a certain three men to live in it together."

"Then his slowness is the more inexplicable."

"I have a notion that there may be an explanation which would not quite please me. It is conceivable that our comrades from beyond the mountains are moving, and he fears an assault upon Santa Marta."

"In that case you could seize the town by joining hands with them."

Maccario smiled. "If we wait a little we can drive Morales out ourselves; and this district belongs to us, you understand. We have watched over it for a long while, and it would not be convenient that others who have done nothing should divide what is to be gained with us when we have secured its liberty."

Appleby laughed, for his companion's naive frankness fre-

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

quently delighted him. "Then," he said, "the only thing would be a prompt assault upon the town, but that is apparently out of the question."

"Who knows!" said Maccario, with a little expressive movement of his shoulders, and sat thoughtfully silent, looking down towards Santa Marta across the cane.

Appleby, who asked no more questions, lay still in his chair, vacantly watching the strip of road that was growing dimmer now. He had toiled with fierce activity under the burning sun since early morning, and a pleasant lassitude was creeping over him, while the faint coolness and deepening shadow was curiously refreshing after the scorching heat and glare. The sun had dipped behind a hill shoulder far away, the peaks grew sharp in outline against a gleam of saffron, and the long waves of cane were fading to a soft and dusky green. Still, though night comes swiftly in that region, the road still showed faintly white where it wound in sinuous curves across the darkening plain, and held his gaze. What he was watching for he did not know, but he was sensible of a vague expectancy. At last, when the road had faded, and the soft darkness closed down, Maccario raised his head suddenly, for a drumming sound rose from the cane.

"Somebody is coming this way, riding hard," he said.

The sound grew a trifle plainer, sank, and rose again, and the two men strained their ears to listen. The darkness was growing denser, but Appleby glanced at his companion.

"The sound commenced suddenly just beyond the spot where our outer picket is," he said.

Maccario nodded. "Morales will certainly watch the road. It is a friend who has ridden by one of the paths through the cane with news for us," he said.

In another few minutes the beat of hoofs was unmistakable, and when it rang loudly down the unseen road the two descended to the big living-room where Pancho had lighted the lamps. Maccario laughed as he sat down, and lighted a cigarette.

"When one assumes the tranquillity it not infrequently comes to him, and if the news is bad we shall hear it soon enough," he said.

Appleby said nothing, for there were times when he found his comrade's sage reflections a trifle exasperating, and he was

HARDING'S APPROBATION

glad when there was a trampling of hoofs in the patio, and he heard Harper greeting somebody. Then he sprang to his feet as a man came in.

"Harding!" he said.

Maccario laughed softly. "Now I think you have a little explanation to make, Don Bernardino, and it is conceivable that the Señor Harding may not be grateful to you," he said.

Harding evidently understood him, for he stood still just inside the doorway, dressed in white duck, looking at Appleby with a little grim smile in his eyes. The dust was grimed upon his face, which was almost haggard, and his pose suggested weariness.

"Since I find my hacienda in the possession of the Sin Verguenza I fancy Don Maccario is right, but I can wait a little for the explanation," he said dryly in Castilian. "I have ridden a long way, and as it is twenty-four hours since I had anything worth mentioning to eat, I wonder whether it would be permissible to ask for a little *comida*?"

Maccario, whose eyes twinkled, summoned Pancho, and sent him for food and wine. Harding ate with an avidity which told its own story, and then turned to Appleby.

"It was not until I reached Havana that I heard about the 'Maine,' and then as I had a good deal of business to put through in this country it seemed advisable to get myself up as a Cuban," he said. "I had evidence that the Administration were watching me, and I would never have got here at all if it hadn't been for the help of a few friends among the Liberationists. Now, I fancy you and Don Maccario have something to tell me."

Appleby sat still a moment looking at him gravely, while Harper, who came in, leaned upon a chair. Then he said slowly: "As you may wish for Don Maccario's corroboration I think I had better tell the story, which is a little involved, in Castilian. You will find patience necessary."

He commenced with his interview with Morales on the night of the Alcaldes' ball, and while Harding watched him with expressionless eyes recounted briefly the two attempts upon the papers made by the spies. Then as he came to Morales' proposition the American's face grew grim.

"That is a clever man," he said. "Go on!"

Appleby proceeded quietly, and while his low voice broke

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

monotonously through the silence of the room Harding's face lost its grimness, and became intent and eager, while a sparkle crept into his eyes.

"So you staked all I had in Cuba on the chance of war, and committed me to backing the Sin Verguenza!" he said.

"Yes," said Appleby. "It was a heavy responsibility, but I could think of no other means of overcoming the difficulty. That I should agree to Morales' terms was out of the question."

"Of course!" said Harding simply. "That is, to a man like you."

Appleby flushed a little. "I had no opportunity of warning you, while it seemed to me that it would go very hard with you if you were seized by Morales. That appeared almost inevitable unless you had friends behind you. The only ones that could be of service in this instance are the Sin Verguenza."

"And so you took your chances of Morales' shooting you?"

"I think," said Appleby quietly, "there was, under the circumstances, very little else that one could do."

Harding looked at him steadily, and then, nodding gravely, turned to Maccario.

"The Señor Appleby has thrown me on the patriots' hands," he said. "I have already done them several small services, as you perhaps know. They will remember that?"

Maccario's eyes twinkled. "I believe they will. The Señor Harding's generosity is well known," he said. "In this country friends who are liberal with their money are scarce, and one is willing to do a little now and then to retain their good will. That, I think, is comprehensible. One has usually a motive."

"Yet, when two men who had not a dollar between them were in peril, a merchant of tobacco ventured into the cuartel at Santa Marta!" said Appleby quietly.

Maccario lifted one shoulder expressively. "One is not always discreet, my friend. There is, however, an important question. The Señor Harding who knows his own countrymen believes there will be war?"

"I believe it is inevitable," said Harding dryly.

A trace of darker color crept into the Cuban's olive face,

HARDING'S APPROBATION

while Harper, who slowly straightened himself, tapped him on the back with a big hand.

"Then you 'll get your liberty! You 're not going to find a Spaniard in Cuba when we 're through," he said.

There was a brief silence, but the intentness in the men's eyes and the hardening of their lips were significant. Then Harding, reaching across the table, grasped Appleby's hand. "I am in your debt, and it 's not going to hurt me to remember it," he said. "There are not many men who could have taken up my hand, and played it out for me as you have done, but I 'm not astonished. I had my notions about you when I left you in charge at San Cristoval. Well, that leads up to something. My affairs in this country are 'most getting too big for me, and I 'm open to take a partner and deal with him liberally. It 's not money I want, but daring conception, and the nerve to hold on and worry through a risky plan. I guess you know the man who would suit me, Mr. Appleby."

A little gleam crept into Appleby's eyes, but it faded again as he glanced at Maccario.

"It is a tempting offer, but I belong to the Sin Verguenza yet," he said. "Can you leave it open, Mr. Harding?"

"For how long?"

"Until Santa Marta has fallen, and the Sin Verguenza are undisputed masters of this region."

He spoke in Castilian, feeling that Maccario's dark eyes were upon him, and Harding smiled.

"Well," he said a trifle dryly, "I guess you could n't help it, and I can't afford to let any of the other men who will follow my lead when we 're through with the war get hold of you. When you have taken Santa Marta come straight along to me, and if we can't fix up something that will suit both parties it will astonish me. Now, I 'm feeling sleepy, and I 've a good deal of figuring to go through with you to-morrow."

Appleby rose and went with him to the room Pancho had made ready, while when they reached it Harding sat down wearily.

"I have another thing to tell you, Appleby," he said. "My daughter Nettie seems to think a good deal of you."

"Miss Harding was kind enough to permit me to call upon her once or twice at the banker's house," said Appleby quietly.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

Harding's eyes twinkled. "If you had gone there every day it wouldn't have worried me. Your head is tolerably level, and Nettie has rather more sense than most young women, but that is not the point, anyway. When she was leaving England she wrote to me, and told me I might let you know there were people over there, and one, I believe, in particular, who had heard the truth about you."

Appleby stood still a moment, with a flush on his forehead, and a curious glow in his eyes.

"Miss Harding told you nothing more, sir?" he said.

"No," said Harding reflectively. "It was n't very explicit, but she seemed to fancy it would be sufficient. Now, I don't think you need worry about the thing, Appleby. Nettie has a good deal of discretion, and if she decided to take up your hand it's no more than you did with mine."

Appleby made no answer, but went out, and leaned upon the veranda balustrade looking up into the soft blueness of the night, while once more an alluring vision seemed to materialize before his eyes. He had a curious faith in Nettie Harding's capabilities, and remembered the promise she had made him that what he longed for should be his.

XXVIII

TONY MAKES AMENDS

THE moon hung low above the clump of cottonwoods that flung their black shadows across the road when Appleby with Harper and four of the Sin Verguenza crept in among the roots which, rising like buttresses, supported the great columnar trunks. Beyond the trees the road wound faintly white towards Santa Marta through the cane that stretched away a vast sweep of dusky blueness, under the moon. The night was hot and almost still, though a little breeze that was heavy with a spicy, steamy smell now and then shook a faint sighing from the cane.

The men sank into the blackest of the shadow with ears strained to catch the slightest sound, while Appleby lay in a hollow with his rifle across his knees where he could follow the strip of road until it twisted sharply. He also fancied that the light was clear enough to make it risky for any of Morales' cazadores to venture round that bend, and there was, he felt tolerably certain, a handful of them not far away, for certain supplies which had been sent the Sin Verguenza had failed to reach the hacienda. Supplies were also necessary, for, as Maccario had predicted, adherents had flocked in daily. They, however, had travelled by paths through the cane, and Appleby had gone out to locate one of the pickets which were watching the road.

It was not exactly his business, and both Maccario and Harding, who had remained at the hacienda because he could not well get away, had protested against his undertaking it, but since the latter had given him Nettie's message Appleby had been curiously restless, and felt that the excitement might help him to shake off the thoughts and fancies that troubled him. It had, however, signally failed to do so as yet, and while he lay with hot fingers clenched on the rifle barrel he

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

once more found himself wondering anxiously what had come about in England.

It was with a thrill of satisfaction, that was mixed with disgust at his own infirmity of purpose, he realized that Nettie Harding must have meant that she had vindicated him in Violet Wayne's eyes, but in that case it was evident that he had gone away in vain, since Nettie could not have proved his innocence without inculpating Tony. It also appeared out of the question that anybody would believe Tony if he told the truth now, and Appleby flushed with anger at himself as he pictured the effect of the blow upon the girl. He knew at last that it was to save her the pain of the discovery he had borne the blame, and yet he could not overcome a curious sense of relief and content at the thought that she had heard he was innocent. Then he wondered what had befallen Tony, and decided with a trace of bitterness that it was no affair of his. Tony had had his chances, and if he had thrown them away had only himself to blame.

At last he shook himself to attention when a distant patter of feet came faintly across the cane. The sound grew plainer as he listened, while here and there a shadowy figure rose up among the roots and sank from sight again. It was evident that two or three men were moving down the road in haste, but the soft patter of their feet did not suggest the approach of the cazadores. Still, it seemed advisable to take precautions, and he sent out two men, who, crossing the road, faded again into invisibility on the edge of the cane.

"Now we're going to find out where that picket is," said Harper. "Those fellows are coming right here, and I guess by the noise they're making they don't belong to the Sin Verguenza."

Appleby repeated the observation in Castilian, and a man unseen among the roots laughed softly.

"The Señor Harper has reason," he said. "Our friends do not travel on a white road with their shoes on when the moon is shining."

In another moment a hoarse cry rose from the cane, the patter of feet quickened suddenly, and Appleby stood up when he heard the sharp ringing of a rifle. Another shot followed, but the men unseen beyond the cane were evidently running

TONY MAKES AMENDS

still, and there was a little murmur from the Sin Verguenza. Appleby made a restraining gesture with his hand.

"I think the cazadores are coming too," he said.

Then there was silence among the cottonwoods, but hard brown fingers stiffened on the rifle barrels, and while the patter of feet grew rapidly louder the strip of white road was swept by watchful eyes. Still nothing moved upon it, until a man appeared where it twisted into the cane. A moment later another showed behind him, and then a third, who seemed to reel a little in his stride.

It was evident that they saw the cottonwoods, and hoped to find concealment there, but the Sin Verguenza lay still watching the three blurred shadowy objects with dispassionate curiosity. What befell the strangers was no concern of theirs, but they were doing excellent service in leading on the cazadores. Then there was a very faint murmur as a cluster of men in uniform appeared, for there were rather more of them than the Sin Verguenza had expected, and it became apparent that they were running faster than the fugitives. Appleby could almost see the faces of the latter now, and a moment later Harper, who was crouching close by, dropped his hand on his comrade's arm.

"That last one's not quite like the rest," he said.

Appleby stiffened his fingers on the rifle at his hip, and stared at the last figure with growing astonishment.

"No. The man's complexion is as light as mine," he said.

Then there was another rifle shot, and a little spurt of dust leapt up from the road. The third man swung suddenly round and a pistol twice flashed in his hand, while his companions flung themselves gasping into the shadow of the cottonwoods. Hands were stretched out that seized them and pulled them down, and a little quiver ran through Appleby as he watched the lonely figure that now showed clear in the moonlight by the edge of the road. Close behind it the cazadores were coming on at a run, and there were considerably more of them than there were of the Sin Verguenza.

Still, the fugitive stood tense and immovable. He was dressed simply in white duck, with a wide felt hat on his head, but there was something curiously familiar in his pose that perplexed Appleby, until turning half round suddenly he

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

looked over his shoulder. Then as his face showed white in the moonlight Appleby gasped and flung up his rifle.

"Keep still!" he cried in English.

He felt the jar on his shoulder, there was a thin red flash, and the smoke was in his eyes. Then spurts of pale flame blazed out from among the trees, and when the soft vapor slid away the road was empty save for one man, who ran straight in towards the cottonwoods with uneven lurching stride. Then while the Sin Verguenza looked on wondering Appleby stepped out from the shadow.

"Tony!" he said. "By all that's wonderful, Tony!"

The stranger stood still gasping, and stared at him, ignoring his outstretched hand. Then he drew back a pace.

"I have found you at last," he said. "I've a good deal to tell you, but it scarcely seems likely those fellows yonder will give me the opportunity now. It's specially unfortunate, because there does not seem to be many of you, and I'm a trifle lame."

Appleby glanced up the road, and saw enough to convince him that the cazadores were slipping forward circumspectly through the shadow of the cane, while it became evident from their murmurs that his companions had decided it was advisable to retire while the way was open. He slipped his arm through Tony's, and they started down a little path through the cane, while Tony endeavored to shake his grasp off, and finding that he could not do so limped along clumsily, leaning heavily upon him. The cazadores, however, apparently knew the ways of the Sin Verguenza too well to venture far from the open in pursuit of them, and finally they came gasping and perspiring into sight of the hacienda. Maccario stood at the gate of the patio waiting them, and glanced curiously at the stranger.

"A prisoner?" he said.

"No," said Appleby. "A friend of mine!"

Maccario swung off his hat, but when he begged Appleby to explain that any friend of his was welcome there he saw that the stranger winced.

They went up to Appleby's room, where there was an awkward silence for a moment or two, when Tony dropped limply into the nearest chair and averted his eyes from Appleby, who leaned upon the table looking down on him compassionately.

TONY MAKES AMENDS

He was worn with travel, and his face showed pallid and haggard under the lamplight.

"How did you chance upon the cazadores?" said Appleby, who felt that the question was trivial as he asked it.

"They were watching the road"; and Tony laughed in a curious hollow fashion, though there was apparently no cause for it. "They nearly got me. I was a little lame, you see. Tore my foot with one of those condemned aloe spikes a day or two ago."

"Well," said Appleby, "you were about the last person I expected to come across. What, in the name of wonder, brought you here?"

Tony looked at him a moment and smiled, while Appleby felt the blood rise to his forehead, and grew angry with himself. The constraint that was evidently upon Tony had extended to him, and would not be shaken off. Why this was so he did not know, but he could not greet his comrade with fitting friendliness.

"I came to find you," said Tony hastily. "Landed at Havana with Harding's address as my only guide. He had, I found out, left the city, but I came across two or three men who seemed to know him, and one of them passed me on to his friends, who contrived to get me here. We travelled, for the most part, at night, hiding in the daytime, and got very little to eat, but most of the men I met did what they could for me when I told them that I had business with a leader of the Sin Verguenza."

Appleby laughed a little. "You will find a bath yonder, and I'll send you up some food," he said. "Then come down when you are ready. You will find me on the veranda."

He spent half an hour pacing up and down the veranda before Tony reappeared, and as it happened Harding came out from his room just then. The moon, which had risen higher now, flooded the veranda with silvery light. Harding glanced at the stranger and pointed to a cane chair, while Appleby, who was not sure whether he was glad or displeased to see him at the moment, introduced them. Tony, however, did not shake hands.

"I had the pleasure of meeting your daughter in England, Mr. Harding, and it was only owing to that fact I managed

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

to get here at all," he said. " You have evidently a good many friends in this country."

" I am glad I have been of service," said Harding, with a smile. " In the meanwhile I have n't the slightest doubt that you and Appleby will excuse me."

Tony looked at him gravely. " I understood from Miss Harding that you had reposed a good deal of trust in Appleby, and that he had taken you into his confidence respecting something which happened in England."

" You have surmised correctly," said Harding.

" Then I would sooner you sat down and listened to me. It is, I fancy, likely that he has not told you all the story. You are not altogether unconcerned in it, since your daughter was the means of sending me here."

Appleby made a little impatient gesture. " Tony," he said sharply, " is it necessary?"

" I believe it is"; and Tony leaned forward in his chair. " It would be a favor if you sat down, sir."

Harding did so, and for ten minutes Tony, who stared straight in front of him at the blue Bougainvillea on the moonlit wall, spoke with quiet conciseness, while Harding sat in the shadow watching him. At last he turned to Harding.

" I think you will see that your confidence in the man I have injured was fully warranted, sir," he said. " If I have made you understand that, it is, at least, a little in reparation. I can't ask you to forgive, Bernard, but I want to straighten out what I can."

Harding for some reason moved uneasily in his chair, but Appleby, leaning across the table, held out his hand.

" You can't look past it now, Tony," he said. " Can't we still be friends?"

Tony glanced at him, and made a curious little sound which resembled a groan, then a red flush crept into his face as he took Appleby's hand. An unpleasant silence followed until Harding spoke.

" I shall hope for your better acquaintance, Mr. Palliser," he said.

Tony looked at him in wonder. " You realize what I have done, sir?"

Harding nodded gravely. " I have heard how you have tried to make it up," he said. " Well, I guess I've seen and

TONY MAKES AMENDS

handled a good many men, and there's more hope of those who trip up and get on their feet again than for quite a few of the others who have never fallen at all. Now, I'm glad you've told me, though, so far as my belief in Mr. Appleby goes, it was not by any means necessary."

Tony made a little movement with his head. "I've made over Dane Cop to you, Bernard," he said. "It is yours by right, and you can take it without feeling that you owe anything to me. Godfrey Palliser meant it for you — until I deceived him."

Appleby said nothing, but his set face showed what he was bearing for his comrade, and Harding quietly touched his shoulder.

"It seems to me that Mr. Palliser is right," he said. "The land is yours, anyway, and you would only hurt him by not taking it."

Tony raised his head, and looked at him gratefully. "Thank you, sir," he said. "It would hurt me, Bernard."

Appleby smiled a little, though it apparently cost him an effort. "Well," he said, "I'm not burdened with money yet, and I think you can afford it."

A light crept into Tony's eyes. "That is one thing accomplished. When will you come back?"

"I don't quite know. I may find an opportunity in a year or two."

"You must come now."

"I can't."

"You must," said Tony, almost hoarsely. "Bernard, can't you see that to bring you over, and to prove that I have made amends is the last chance for me?"

"The last chance. You must be more explicit, Tony."

They were both apparently oblivious of the fact that Harding was watching them, and Tony's voice trembled a little with eagerness.

"It's the only way I can make my peace with Violet," he said. "Can't you understand what she is to me? She would promise nothing until I had made all straight with you — and I can't let her go."

Appleby's face was compassionate, but he shook his head. "It is out of the question, Tony. I can't — even for you," he said. "I have got to stay here, and see this trouble through."

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"Mr. Appleby is right," said Harding. "He has work to do."

Tony seemed to groan, and sat still a pace. Then he looked up with a little flush in his face.

"Well," he said very quietly, "in that case I'll stay with you."

Appleby laughed. "The thing is palpably absurd. A Palliser of Northrop consorting with the Sin Verguenza!"

"Still," said Tony doggedly, "I'm not going back to leave you in peril here. I couldn't face Violet, and tell her that tale. Nor am I as sure as you seem to be that the thing is so absurd. It's only the moral courage that has been left out of me."

"Try to realize what it is you wish to do," said Appleby almost sternly.

Tony smiled curiously. "It is quite plain to me already. I'm going to stay here and see the affair through with you; then when the insurgents will let you go you'll come with me, if it's only for a week or two, and tell Violet that you have forgiven me. In the meanwhile Craythorne and my agent will take better care of Northrop than ever I could do. There is another point you don't seem to have remembered. I should almost certainly be made a prisoner by the Spaniards if you sent me away."

"There is a good deal of sense in that," said Harding.

Appleby sat silent for almost a minute, and then seeing that Tony was resolute made a little gesture of resignation.

"Well," he said slowly, "we will talk to Maccario. Mr. Harding, I may ask you for a month's leave when we have taken Santa Marta."

"You shall have it," said Harding quietly.

Just then, as it happened, Maccario strolled into the veranda, and Appleby, who stood up, laid his hand on Tony's shoulder.

"I have the honor of presenting you another comrade," he said.

XXIX

TONY PERSISTS

FOUR of the Sin Verguenza girt with bandoliers were waiting in the patio while Harding made hasty preparations for his journey when Appleby and Tony stood on the veranda. The night was a trifle clearer than any of them desired, though the half-moon had dipped behind the flat roof which was projected sharply against the luminescent blueness of the sky. A stream of light shone out from the open window of Harding's room, and Pancho's voice rose suggestively now and then as he watched him dressing. Harding, who had affairs of importance with the banker, was going into Santa Marta, and since it appeared more than likely that Morales knew he had arrived at San Cristoval, it was essential that, in order to avoid observation, he should be attired correctly in Cuban fashion.

Appleby, however, scarcely heard the major-domo, for he was making another attempt to induce Tony to leave with Harding, who purposed to head for the coast in the hope of finding a steamer there when he had made what arrangements he could respecting his Cuban possessions. Tony listened with a quiet smile, and then resolutely shook his head.

"We have been through it all before, and you are only wasting breath," he said. "I am going home with you when you have taken Santa Marta, but until then I stay here."

Appleby lost his patience. "It's a piece of purposeless folly. What have you to do with the fall of Santa Marta?"

"It is also my last chance," said Tony, with a curious little smile. "You could understand that if you wished to."

"No," said Appleby doggedly. "I don't think I could. Nor do I believe you would convince any reasonable man."

Tony smiled curiously. "One has objections to stripping himself, so to speak, before even a friend's eyes. It really isn't decent, but — since you are persistent — what I went

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

through at Northrop was getting insupportable. The anxiety was crushing the life out of me, and it's out of the question that I should go back there while you are carrying the load that should have been upon my shoulders here. I'm not claiming any virtue I don't possess. Indeed, it's selfishness and what is most likely superstitious cowardice that decides me to stay, but I feel that until I have made all right with you there can be no peace for me."

"I do not want to live in England, and you are taking too personal a view of the thing. Since there is Violet to consider your life is not your own to throw away, and I am not sure you know how much she would forgive you."

Tony's face grew a trifle grim, and the light that streamed from the window showed the weariness in it.

"The trouble is that Violet was never in love with — me," he said very slowly. "I have a gift for deceiving people, even when I don't mean to, and it was not until the truth came out she saw me as I am. It is difficult to admit it, but there the fact is. She gave her heart to the man she supposed me to be, but I loved her for herself, and because I know she is the one woman who could make an honorable man of me. I lose my last hope if I let her go."

He stopped a moment with a little groan, while Appleby regarded him compassionately, and then continued in a low strained voice.

"Now you see the selfishness of it, and why I mean to stay. I must prove I'm not wholly worthless by making amends to you."

Appleby stood silent a moment. He knew Tony's unstable nature well, and that his passion for Violet Wayne, which was almost reverential, might yet lift him to a higher level. It was also evident that in desiring to make amends Tony was wise, and Appleby felt a curious sympathy for the man who clung so desperately to his last hope of vindicating himself in her eyes. That Tony's motive was, as he had admitted, largely selfish, and his contrition by no means of the highest order, did not trouble him. It was his part to help and not censure him, and with a little swift movement he laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"Well," he said quietly, "you may be right, and since nothing else will content you, you must stay."

TONY PERSISTS

Just then Harding, attired in white duck and a big Panama hat, came out into the veranda, and glanced at them.

"If you are coming with me, Mr. Palliser, you have no time to lose," he said. "You may, however, find my company dangerous, especially if we can't get into Santa Marta and reach the banker's house while it's dark."

Tony smiled. "I'm not coming, sir."

"Well," said Harding, glancing at him curiously, "I guess you know your own affairs best. Maccario sent that fellow word to be ready to smuggle me in, Appleby."

"He will be waiting, and you are not likely to have much difficulty with the patrols when you are inside the town. Still, it is a big risk, sir."

Harding laughed. "I have been taking steep chances all my life, and I have quite a few dollars scattered up and down this country which I can't afford to throw away. They're not exactly mine, since it seems to me that I'm holding them in trust for my daughter Nettie. Now, I guess I've kept those men of yours long enough already."

He shook hands with Tony, and the men below flung up their rifles to the slope when he and Appleby went down the stairway. Maccario walked down the tram-line with them, and then stopped a moment when they reached the road, where Harding laid his hand on Appleby's arm.

"I leave you in charge of San Cristoval and my affairs here with every confidence," he said.

"I shall endeavor to deserve it, sir," said Appleby. "Still, it is not quite out of the question that Morales may burn the hacienda."

Harding smiled. "The hacienda can be built again, and they can't blow up the land. It will stop right there all the time, in spite of them."

"Still, they could seize it."

"Well," said Harding, with quiet confidence, "when we have chased every Spanish soldier out of Cuba I'll get it back again, and that is just what is going to happen before very long. It's quite difficult to freeze a citizen of my country out of his property."

"Unless an American trust casts covetous eyes upon it," said Appleby.

Harding laughed as he shook hands with him and Mac-

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

cario, and then turned away with a smile still upon his lips. The four Sin Verguenza plodded behind him down the dim road, and Maccario glanced at his companion.

"One would not have fancied the Señor Harding knew he was taking a heavy risk," he said.

"Still, I think it was quite plain to him."

Maccario glanced across the cane towards Santa Marta. "I had many friends there, and he has one or two at most. Morales is a daring and clever man — but it is his misfortune that in this affair he has others of the same kind against him."

"That is an admission," said Appleby, with a little smile. "If you count the Señor Harper, two of them come from America."

Maccario laughed. "And one from England! Men of that kind are not confined to any one country, my friend. Still, they are perhaps more plentiful in the Peninsula — and Cuba — than elsewhere."

Appleby said nothing, and they walked slowly back to the hacienda.

Rather more than a fortnight passed uneventfully, and save for a few affairs between outposts and patrols there was no outbreak of hostilities. Morales lay in Santa Marta with the country rising against him, and Maccario patiently waited his time, for the Sin Verguenza were growing stronger every day. The insurrection was still largely sporadic and indifferently organized, and since each leader acted for the most part independently what was happening elsewhere only concerned the Sin Verguenza indirectly, while the struggle had become almost a personal question between them and Morales. In the meanwhile Appleby heard that Harding had eluded the latter's vigilance and left Santa Marta.

Then late one night a man came gasping up the veranda stairway, and Appleby and Maccario descended half-dressed to meet him in the big living-room. The dust was white upon him, and he blinked at them out of half-closed eyes, while Appleby noticed that he limped a little. Maccario pointed to a chair, and poured him out a glass of wine.

"You have come a long way?" he said.

"From Brena Abajo. I left there in the afternoon the day before yesterday."

TONY PERSISTS

"On a mule?"

The man smiled grimly as he pointed to his broken shoes.
"I came on these," he said.

Maccario turned to Appleby. "Our friend walks fast. It is counted a four days' journey. Still, I think he knows that one seldom gains anything by trifling with the Sin Verguenza."

A little gleam crept into the man's dark eyes. "One walks fast when he is eager for vengeance," he said. "I had a little wine-shop, and a comrade who I trusted, four days ago. Comes a column of Candotto's Peninsulares, and there is an asking of questions of the Alcalde, who is not a friend of mine. Andres, it is discovered, has smuggled rifles to the friends of liberty in the mountains."

Maccario made a little gesture. "It went hard with your friend?"

"He died with a jibe at Candotto, who would discover where our comrades were. The wine-shop is a heap of ashes now, but that night the friends of liberty came out from the barrancos and crept in upon Brena Abajo."

"They drove the soldiers out?"

"No," said the man very quietly. "The Peninsulares fought well. There are many dead patriots in the streets of Brena Abajo, and only Candotto's men left to bury them."

Maccario straightened himself suddenly in his chair. "It was a strong column?"

"No, señor. Four companies only. It seems Morales had sent for them."

Maccario turned to Appleby. "Now we know why Morales, who does nothing without a motive, was waiting. Well, they will march slowly, fearing another attack, with a section or two thrown forward in case there were friends of ours waiting them among the cane. The Colonel Candotto would, however, send messengers to Morales."

The man laughed in a curiously grim fashion. "Then they would never reach him. The paths are watched, and the friends of liberty are bold now there is to be war with America."

"I think our friend is right," said Maccario, who stood up with a little smile. "The service he has done us will be re-

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

membered in due time. Señor, the major-domo whom you will find below will give you food and show you where you can sleep."

The man went out, and Appleby glanced at his comrade with a little flush in his face.

"I think our time has come," he said.

Maccario's dark eyes sparkled. "We march in an hour. Candotto's men will march circumspectly, and lie behind the walls of an aldea at night. When they reach Santa Marta it will be to-morrow evening, and they will not find Morales then."

"No," said Appleby. "I think we can get in, but it will be a risk. It would have been certain in another week or two. We were growing stronger every day."

Maccario smiled dryly. "There are times when one cannot wait too long, my friend."

He went out upon the veranda, a man called out sharply in the shadows below, there was a hum of voices, and dim figures swarmed into the patio. Then there was a tramp of feet and a jingling of steel, lights flashed in the windows, and Appleby, slipping clear of the bustle, entered Tony's room. He lighted the little lamp, and then sat down on the bed. Tony lay close beside him sleeping quietly, and Appleby felt a curious little thrill as he looked down on him. The man had wronged him grievously, but the bond which had grown strong in happier days bound them together still.

The room was very hot, and the quiet face that was almost boyish yet was beaded with perspiration, but Appleby saw there was a stamp upon it which it had not borne in England. Tony, it seemed, had changed, and Appleby felt that he might still do his work with credit, and be the stronger because of his fall. Then as he struggled with a faint sense of envy and bitterness Tony opened his eyes and smiled.

"You there, Bernard? I was back at Northrop with you and Violet a moment ago," he said drowsily.

"Still, you are in Cuba now," said Appleby.

Tony appeared to be endeavoring to collect his thoughts. "It is difficult to realize it, and I can't quite persuade myself I'm awake yet," he said. "The sun was shining on the lawn, and I could see the red geraniums and the little blue lobelia round the border as clearly as I ever saw anything in my life.

TONY PERSISTS

You were talking to Violet, and the trouble between us seemed to have gone. Why could n't you let me sleep on?"

"I felt tempted to," said Appleby gravely. "Still, you see, we are marching to assault Santa Marta almost immediately."

Tony sprang out of bed, and was half dressed when he turned to Appleby again with a sparkle in his eyes.

"I'm taller than most of these Cubans. You'll have to put me at the head of your company," he said.

"No," said Appleby dryly. "We are leaving a handful of men behind us to hold the hacienda, and I mean you to stay with them."

Tony laughed a clear, ringing laugh. "Did you think for a moment that I would? Now, you will gain nothing by insisting, and you don't command. If I can't get your permission I'll get Maccario's."

"There is very grim work on hand, and the rest are more fitted for it than you."

Tony turned with a trace of stiffness which became him. "There was a time when you apparently took pleasure in pointing out my slackness, Bernard," he said. "Still, while I'm willing to admit it, I think it's moral,—and not physical."

"Of course!"

Tony's face relaxed, and he laughed. "That's devilishly complimentary—but I'm coming. I've never been in a fight, and the sensation will be a pleasant novelty, but there's something else. You see, it may happen that one of us gets hurt."

"It is, I believe, quite likely."

"Well," said Tony very quietly, "that is just why I'm coming. I don't wish to be uncivil—but while Maccario's willing I think it's evident that you can't stop me."

Appleby looked at him a moment with a curious softness in his eyes, and then made a little gesture of resignation, while Maccario, who opened the door quietly, smiled as he glanced at them.

"The Señor Palliser will march with us?" he said.

"Of course!" said Tony lightly, but Appleby, who felt a little shiver run through him, said nothing at all.

Twenty minutes later the Sin Verguenza went stumbling

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

down the tram-line file by file, and when they swung out into the carretera Tony Palliser marched with the leading four at the head of one company. The night was still and dark, and the tramp of feet alone rang through the silence of the dusky cane, for the Sin Verguenza knew there was grim work before them, and marched with portentous quietness. Their time had come, but they realized with an unpleasant distinctness that if they failed very few of them would escape the vengeance of Morales.

XXX

MORALES PRESERVES HIS FAME

THERE was a pale shining in the eastern sky when the Sin Verguenza came into sight of Santa Marta. The town lay, a smear of deeper shadow, upon the dusky levels in front of them, but the transition from darkness to light is swift in that country, and here and there a flat roof higher than those it stood among grew out of the obscurity into definite form. Save for the rhythmic beat of marching feet, there was stillness among the cane, and nothing moved on all the dim levels but the long black column that crawled down the shadowy road.

Then the distant peaks stood out in sharper contour against the paling blueness of the western sky, and Tony, marching outside man of one four, glanced over his shoulder. He could dimly see the lines of men behind him plodding through the dust, and their sloped rifles led his gaze aloft. The sky was now shining with a pearly lustre like the inside of a shell, and low down upon a cane the flush of crimson blazed into brilliancy. The rifles of the rearguard cut against it as they rose and fell, and the faces of the men behind him became suddenly distinguishable. He could also make out Appleby swinging along a few paces away on his right hand. Then he glanced in front of him, and saw that the great peaks were now flushed with a warm pink, until the dust rolled thicker and blotted out everything. It thinned as they swung through a white aldea, and the light which had swept down the hillsides touched Santa Marta when they came out again, so that the city shone immaculately white upon a setting of luminescent green.

He gazed at it in wonder, for the long night march through a silent land, the thrill of excitement, and the unwonted bracing of his nerves to face a physical peril had not been without

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

their effect on him. Tony was usually somewhat materialistic, but just then the bodily part of him was under the domination of the spirit, and he was sensible of a curious exaltation. Turning his head he glanced at Appleby with a little laugh.

"It is beautiful!" he said. "It came upon one so suddenly out of the night that one could almost fancy it a vision — of the everlasting city."

"The one upon the Tiber?" said Appleby.

"The one seen in Patmos nearly two thousand years ago."

Appleby laughed curiously. "I'm afraid Santa Marta will be much more like the other place before the day is through, and it is not a very appropriate simile, Tony. One cannot storm those gates of precious stones."

"Well," said Tony reflectively, "it's not a subject either of us know very much about, but Nettie Harding seemed to think one could. We were lounging on the lawn at Low Wood that afternoon, and she was so sure about it that she almost convinced me. She said the gates were made of gold and ivory, and she got the fancy from the song you have heard Hester sing — but no doubt it means the same thing!"

Appleby glanced at him sharply, for the light was clearer now, and saw a look in Tony's face which was new to him. It was curiously quiet in spite of his little smile. Still, he made no answer, and there was silence, until from beyond the dust cloud rose the strident crackle of riflery.

"The advance guard are driving in the pickets. We'll be in the thick of it directly," he said, and a murmur passed along the company, while the rhythmic tread swelled in a sharp staccato.

It was evident to the Sin Verguenza that they had difficult work before them, while a direct attack in daylight was not a manœuvre they had any great liking for. In this case, however, there was no evading it, for while they knew adherents would flock in from every aldea once they held Santa Marta, it was equally clear that should Candotto's Peninsulares join hands with Morales they could never seize the town. Haste was also advisable since he would know that an attack was imminent now, and when Maccario's voice rang out of the dust the pace grew faster while the column drew out in length.

Twice a half-company swung clear and vanished amidst the

MORALES PRESERVES HIS FAME

scattered gardens, and at last the rest flung themselves into the little enclosures between the aloe hedges close outside Santa Marta. Then there was a flashing of pale flame from the crest of every white wall, and Tony stared in astonishment when he saw none of the Sin Verguenza beyond the little handful of men about him in a garden. They were crouching beneath a low wall apparently made of blocks of sun-baked soil, while Appleby lay behind a clump of aloes close in front of him.

Beyond the aloes, the white walls rose glaringly bright with smears of bluish vapor drifting from every opening, though the smoke was thickest about one wide gap between them. As he watched it, oblivious of the rifle in his hand, there was a thin whirling of flame in the midst of the vapor, and a sound that resembled a rapid hammering came sharply through the din. Then a strip of the mud wall crumbled into dust, which made a haze about the garden, and a spurt of flung-up soil struck him in the face. A man behind him screamed, and while there was a pattering among the bananas close on his right Appleby crawled past him.

"A quick-firer! Morales has two of them, and he has found our range. We'll get on," he said.

Tony said nothing, but he could still see the portentous flashing amidst the smoke, and next moment felt the jar of his rifle upon his shoulder. He did not remember pressing the trigger but he could shoot well, and his fingers seemed to move without any prompting from him, for he saw the empty shell flung out and heard the snap of the lever as another cartridge slid into the chamber. Then while he pressed his cheek down on the stock and stiffened his left hand on the barrel he heard Appleby's voice raised in Castilian, and saw that his comrades were flitting forward. The rifle muzzle tilted upwards, and in another moment he was on his feet, and clambering over a low wall, ran past several small houses, and then dropped behind an aloe screen again.

Appleby, who knelt on one knee close beside him with a pair of glasses which had once belonged to an officer of cazadores in his hand, was still speaking sharply in Castilian, and Tony fancied that the men about them were all gazing towards the gap in the high walls where the carretera entered Santa Marta. Then there was a blast of riflery that set the aloes quivering

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

and rolled away to the right of him, while, when a minute or two later nothing followed the click of the striker, he found the magazine was empty and the rifle barrel hot in his hand. It was an American Marlin, and while he dropped fresh cartridges in through the slide Appleby rose to his feet, and the Sin Verguenza were once more scrambling through enclosures nearer to the town.

The cluster Tony was attached to stopped among tall shrubs with crimson flowers of a heavy scent, with nothing between them and the white houses but a bare strip of dusty soil, and it became evident that they were waiting for something, for the firing slackened. Then further away to the right men sprang out into the open, straggling by twos and threes as they ran towards the town. The smoke grew thicker along the white walls, and some went down, while the dust they fell in splashed and spurted as a still pool would do under a driving hail. Still, more came on behind them, and Tony was struggling with an impulse to shout aloud when, from the whole front of the Sin Verguenza, there broke out a crash of riflery. He gasped as the smoke rolled down, for his desire to see had become almost overwhelming, and then as the firing slackened again it became evident that the little white forms were running still.

There were, however, not many of them now, and Tony grasped their purpose when they swept in close beneath the dazzling wall, while Appleby, who stood upright, with the glasses at his eyes, said something hoarsely in evident approbation. Once more there was a crackle of firing, and the smoke grew thick, while when it cleared the dusty strip was empty save for the white objects which lay still here and there. Tony surmised that the others had found entrance into the town by a narrow lane, or through the house of a friendly citizen.

A minute or two later this became evident, for the crash of firing grew furious on the roofs above the gap, and Appleby, who thrust his glasses into their case, was shouting hoarsely. Rising by twos and threes the men sprang out from among the flowering shrubs, and Tony saw the low walls and clumps of aloes become alive with scurrying forms. They seemed to move independently and without formation, though Appleby, with hand swung up, was shouting in Castilian, and Maccario

MORALES PRESERVES HIS FAME

went by pointing with a Spanish infantry officer's sword. The gleam of it in the intense sunlight dazzled Tony's eyes, and he stood still, uncertain what was going on, and gasping with excitement, when Appleby's hand fell on his shoulder.

"I can't tell you to hold off now we're going in," he said. "Still, it's devilishly risky. You'll not be unnecessarily rash, Tony."

He sprang forward with three or four more at his heels, and Tony found himself running a few yards behind him. He could see that the Sin Verguenza were following, but save that they ran with wide spaces between them they seemed to keep no order, and to have only one purpose, to cross the perilous bare space as rapidly as they could.

The time that cost them appeared interminable, but it became evident that a few at least of those who had gained an entry into the town were firing on the cazadores who held the mouth of the carretera, and in another minute or two they swept up to it and stopped again, gasping in the smoke, with high white walls above them, and a mound of soil and torn-up pavement meshed with wires close in front of them. Tony remembered he had heard that in these days of magazine rifles and hopper-fed guns an attack of the kind was foredoomed to fail, but it seemed that the Sin Verguenza meant to try it, for already Maccario was half-way up the slope, with Appleby, pistol in hand, close behind him, and while a savage cry went up a wave of scrambling men seemed to toss together and roll on. It swept up to the crest of the barrier, and plunged into the smoke, and the cazadores wavered, turned, and fled. They were outnumbered, and, as it transpired later, had been galled by a fire from the roofs above, while Appleby eventually discovered a cartridge partly torn to pieces stuck immovably in the chamber of their quick-firing gun.

In the meanwhile Appleby was grimed with perspiration, smoke, and dust, while his hand was blackened by the fouling from the pistol. Strung to a tension that was too great for nervous excitement, he moved, as it were, with an automatic precision and collectedness, grasping the import of each turn of the struggle with a dispassionate perspicacity, which in less eventful moments he would have been incapable of. The faculty of swift deduction and decision may have been born in him, but it was, at least, evident to the Sin Verguenza, for

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

even then in the stress of desperate effort they seemed to comprehend and obey him. Now and then Maccario had shouted hoarse questions to him, and though the answers apparently came without reflection the leader of the Sin Verguenza concurred when he grasped their purport.

It was by his order the shattered leading company flung itself into the houses when the Sin Verguenza were met by an enfilading volley as they reeled into the calle. The street might have proved a death-trap while the cazadores held the windows, but one could pass along the roofs, and the troops came out headlong when the Sin Verguenza descended upon them from above. Then they in turn found the calle too hot to hold them when they faced the fire of the second company which had taken shelter in the doorways. It was strewn with huddled objects lying upon the hot stones when they fled out of it, and a few minutes later Appleby stopped close by where Tony stood in the larger plaza. Tony's face was set and white, though there was a curious gleam in his eyes, and he seemed to shiver a little as he glanced back up the glaring street. It was very still now, a narrow gap between the white walls that were ridged with shattered green lattices, but filmy wisps of vapor still drifted out of the doorways.

"We have got in, but it has cost you a good deal," he said.

Appleby said nothing, but Maccario, who came up, and following Tony's gaze glanced at the huddled figures on the stones, made a little comprehensive gesture.

"There is a price to everything, but in this case it would have been heavier had not your countryman been quick to copy Morales' plan," he said. "Still, I think by the firing our friends who went on in front are also in, and as they will close the way out Morales will be waiting us in the cuartel."

"It stands alone," said Appleby. "One cannot get in by the roofs."

He pointed to a ridge of flat roof that, rising above the others, cut the blue of the sky. A streak of gold and crimson flaunted above it from a towering staff.

"We have perhaps four hours," said Maccario; "but if that flag is flying when the Peninsulares march in it may never come down again."

"I think one will be enough," said Appleby quietly. "We will wait two or three minutes until the rest come up."

MORALES PRESERVES HIS FAME

The stragglers were formed into their companies in the plaza, and Maccario, impressing a citizen whom he dragged out of his dwelling, sent him on with a scribbled summons to Morales to deliver up the cuartel. The message was terse and laconic, and Maccario smiled dryly when the man departed very much against his wishes bearing a white handkerchief on a cane.

"One complies with civilized customs; it is required of him. And a rest of a few minutes will not hurt my men," he said. "Still, it is a waste of courtesy when it is known beforehand what Morales' answer will be."

While they waited there was a little derisive laughter as, with Harper on the flank of the first four, another band of the Sin Verguenza tramped into the plaza. They had, he explained disgustedly, found a feebly defended entrance by a narrow alley, and had lost their way during the pursuit of the handful of cazadores who had attempted to hold it. He had already left the ranks, and grinned at Maccario suggestively as he laid a bottle of red wine in Tony's hands.

"The boys struck a place where they sell it, and you're not an officer, anyway," he said. "It might come in handy, and if the others are stuck on discipline they need n't have any."

The men had refilled the magazines by this time, and were growing impatient when the citizen came back again. He carried a strip of paper torn across the middle, and made a little deprecatory gesture as he passed it to Maccario.

"That is the only answer the Colonel Morales sends," he said.

Appleby smiled dryly, but a faint flush crept into Maccario's face.

"It is what one would have expected — and it is evident he understands," he said. "There is no room in Cuba for him and the Sin Verguenza."

Then he spoke sharply, there was a passing of orders, and the Sin Verguenza swung forward down the broad highway that led to the cuartel. The street was silent and empty under the scorching sun, with green lattices closed, and doors shut, but the men could see the square mass of the building towering white and grim, with the crimson and gold of Spain flaunting over it on the faint hot breeze. They marched in due formation now, but behind them came a rabble long held down

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

by terror, men with bitter wrongs who carried rifles torn from the fallen cazadores, machetes, and iron bars. They had also a long score against Morales, and their time had come.

They were close on the cuartel, and still the white building was silent, when the Sin Verguenza stopped a moment or two, and men with iron bars beat down the door of a house Maccario pointed to. Then the most part of one company vanished within it, and it was not until they poured out on the flat roof the rest went on. It seemed to Appleby that save for the tramp of feet the street was curiously still, though he noticed that now a green lattice was open every here and there.

Then the silence was suddenly broken by a crash of rifley, and the front of the houses was smeared by drifting smoke. Morales, it was evident, did not mean to hold his hand until they reached the cuartel. Here and there a man staggered and reeled from the ranks, there was a sharp snapping upon the stones, but Maccario's voice rang through the din, and the Sin Verguenza went on at a furious run. They were met by the flash of a volley when they swept into the open space in front of the cuartel, shrank back, and reeled into the sliding smoke again, while the rifles of their comrades swept the windows from the houses opposite. Twice they beat the great door in the archway almost down, but those who swung the hammers and machetes melted away under the rifle flame, and then Harper went shouting at the door with a great iron bar. There were, however, men with grim faces from the alleys of Santa Marta behind him now, striking with torn-up railings, pounding with paving stones, while from roof and windows the rifles crashed.

Then the door bent inwards, and with a shout of triumph and execration the Sin Verguenza poured in across the barricade of stones and soil in cases. The din had grown bewildering, and the men seemed oblivious of sight and sound in their passion, while Appleby, who shouldered his way through the press, noticed only the closed inner door of the patio, and the ruins of the torn-up veranda stairway. Again it cost the Sin Verguenza a heavy price to break that door down, but nothing would have stopped them or those who followed them now, and they fought their way up the wide stairway, driving the cazadores back until they poured out on to the higher veranda



"THEY WERE MET BY THE FLASH OF A VOLLEY." — Page 282.

MORALES PRESERVES HIS FAME

where Morales stood with a bright sword in his hand at the foot of the big flagstaff. There was a little cluster of cazadores about him, but Appleby did not know where the rest had gone, for the struggle had become general, and scattered handfuls of men were fighting independently all over the building. He, however, fancied by the shouts and the confused din that most of them and the Sin Verguenza had swept on up the higher stairway to the roof above, for he and Maccario and Tony were almost alone.

Maccario stopped suddenly and swung off his hat.

"The cuartel is ours now, and it would serve no purpose to waste more men. Your sword, señor," he said.

Morales made him a little punctilious salutation, and glanced at the bright blade in his hand. Then he turned to the men about him, and smiled grimly, as though in answer to the murmur that rose from them.

"Never while I live. It belongs to Spain," he said.

The little drama scarcely lasted a minute, but it forced itself into Appleby's memory, and he could long afterwards picture Morales standing very straight with set lips and a gleam in his dark eyes, the handful of men with rifles behind him, and the grim face of the slim young officer Harper had spared at the hacienda. Tony was gasping close at his side, and the flag of Spain streamed, a strip of gold and crimson, above them all.

Then more men grimed with dust and smoke poured into the veranda, and Maccario, who made a little deprecatory gesture, raised his sword.

"Then, with excuses, señor! Comrades, we must have that flag," he said.

A man beside Morales whose head was bound with a crusted bandage flung up his rifle, there was a flash, and one of the Sin Verguenza reeled and plunged down from the shattered stairway into the patio. Then there was a shout, a crash, and a whirling haze of smoke, and as Appleby sprang towards the flagstaff a cazador lunged at him with his bayonet. His finger closed on the pistol trigger, but there was no answering flash, and another shadowy figure seemed to slip in between him and the soldier. The latter went down with a man upon him, while Appleby pressed on through the acrid haze. A man whom he recognized as Harper seemed to reach the staff simultaneously with himself, a knife flashed,

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

and a hoarse voice cried in English as a rope was thrust into his hand.

"Haul!" it said. "Down she comes."

A moment or two later the limp folds of red and gold fell into Appleby's hands, and it was evident that other men on the roofs and in the patio had seen the flag come down, for a shout of exultation rolled across the town. Then Appleby, who flung the flag from him, turned and glanced along the veranda with a little shiver.

Save for two or three who lay still in the glaring sunlight the cazadores had melted away, and he fancied they had been driven through the gap in the torn-up balustrade or had flung themselves into the patio. The slim young lieutenant held himself up by a railing, with his face horribly awry, while Maccario stood still looking down on the olive-faced officer who lay close in front of him. His kepi had fallen off, but his brown fingers were still clenched upon his sword, and he stared back at the leader of the Sin Verguenza with sightless eyes. Maccario, who apparently saw Appleby, stooped, and pointed to a little blue mark on the side of the officer's head.

"It is what one would have expected. A brave soldier!" he said.

Appleby said nothing, but looked round for Tony, and felt suddenly chilly when he did not see him. Then with horrible misgivings he turned towards a man who lay partly upon a fallen cazador with a rifle beside him. Just then the man lifted his head, and it was with a gasp he recognized the drawn, white face as Tony Palliser's.

"Tony, you're not hurt?" he said, with hoarse anxiety.

Tony smiled wryly. "I think I am," he said. "This fellow got his bayonet into me, and I have a notion that I'm bleeding internally. I suppose there is a doctor in Santa Marta."

Appleby turned and seized Maccario by the shoulder. The latter, leaning over the balustrade, called out sharply, and in a moment or two three or four of the Sin Verguenza came up and lifted Tony. As they moved away with him Maccario stooped and laid Morales' kepi over his face. Then he touched Appleby gently.

"I have seen a good many wounds, and I think the Señor Palliser will not fight again," he said.

XXXI

STRUCK OFF THE ROLL

IT was with difficulty a handful of the Sin Verguenza cleared a way for Tony's bearers through the clamorous mob below, and an hour had passed when Appleby, who had seen his comrade safely bestowed there, came out, grave in face, from the Spanish banker's house. The doctor Maccario sent had, it was evident, no great hope of his patient's recovery, though he insisted that he should be left in quietness.

A messenger from Maccario was waiting when Appleby reached the patio, and it was a relief to find that he had in the meanwhile work to do. Still, he stood almost a minute blinking about him with eyes that were dazzled by the change from the dimness of the hot room behind the closed lattices where Tony lay. The patio was flooded with glaring sunlight, and a confused din rose from every corner of Santa Marta. The hot walls flung back the tramp of feet and the exultant vivas of the mob, while from the tall church towers the clash of jangling bells rang across the town drowning the occasional crackle of riflery, for it was evident that scattered handfuls of the cazadores were fighting still.

Then the brown-faced man beside him made a little gesture of impatience when there was a crash of firing louder than the rest.

"Those cazadores are obstinate, and Don Maccario waits," he said.

Appleby went with him vacantly, for now the strain had slackened he felt limp and his thoughts were in a whirl. Tony, it seemed, was dying, and the almost brotherly affection Appleby had once cherished for his comrade came back to him. As yet he could only realize the one painful fact with a poignant sense of regret.

Maccario, however, had work waiting him, and the day dragged through, though Appleby never remembered clearly

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

all that happened during it. It was noon when they had cleared the town of the last of the cazadores, and bestowed those who had the wisdom to yield themselves in the cuartel. The rest leapt to destruction from windows and roofs, or went down, grimly clenching their hot rifles, in barricaded patios and on slippery stairways. Appleby was thankful when the work was done, though he had taken no part in it, for Maccario, with a wisdom his comrade had not expected, bade him organize a guard, and see that there was no purposeless destruction of property. It was not, he said, a foray the Sin Verguenza had made, but an occupation they had effected, and there was nothing to be gained by pushing the wealthy loyalists to desperation. He also observed dryly that their dollars might fail to reach the insurgent treasury at all if collected independently by the rank and file.

The task was more to Appleby's liking than the one he had anticipated, and it was necessary, since the smaller merchants in Cuba and also in parts of Peninsular Spain have no great confidence in bankers, and prefer a packet of golden onzas or a bag of pesetas to the best accredited check. He also contrived to accomplish it with success, somewhat to the astonishment of those whose property he secured to them, when they found he demanded nothing for himself, while he fancied there was reason in his companion's observation as they went back to report to Maccario when there was quietness in the town. Harper sighed as they came out of the last loyalist's house.

"I guess Maccario knew what he was about when he sent you to see this contract through," he said.

"Well," said Appleby, "it was a trifle more pleasant than turning out the cazadores."

Harper grinned somewhat ruefully. "That's not quite what I mean. Any one else with our opportunities would have been rich for life. Now, you didn't seem to notice the diamond brooch the señora took out from her laces when she asked you to keep the rabble out of the house. It would have brought two hundred dollars in New York."

Appleby looked at him with a little dry smile. "I have asked you no questions, but your pockets are suspiciously bulky."

"Cigars," said Harper disgustedly, pulling out a handful.

STRUCK OFF THE ROLL

"Worth a dollar a piece in my country by the smell of them, but I'm not setting up a tobacco store! If I ever get hold of another contract of this kind I'll take somebody else along."

Appleby laughed a little, but his face grew grave again as they turned towards the banker's house to inquire how Tony was progressing. There was no change, they were told, but the doctor, who was busy elsewhere, had left imperative instructions that no one was to see him.

Appleby was glad he had little leisure for reflection during the rest of the day, which was passed in strenuous activity. There were defences to be improvised, and ambulance corps to organize, barricades built, and men driven to their posts from the wine-shops, for Candotto's Peninsulares would shortly arrive. They never came, however, but instead of them two hundred dusty men with rifles from Brena Abajo marched in, and a horde of peons from every aldea in the vicinity armed with staves and machetes followed them when dusk was closing down. Then once more the bells clashed exultantly above the clamorous town.

The soft darkness had descended upon Santa Marta, and there was quietness again, when Appleby and Harper took their places at the banquet in the Alcalde's house where Maccario had decided he would establish the provisional administration. The great room blazed with light, the tables were piled with such luxuries as could be found in the city, fruits and flasks of wine, and Appleby, who was seated at Maccario's right hand, gazed with a vague interest down the long rows of faces. They were exultant, eager, inscrutable, and anxious, for the loyalist citizens had evidently considered it advisable to comply with the leader of the Sin Verguenza's invitation.

Maccario was now dressed immaculately, and the handful of loyalists with Castilian taste and precision, but there were also men with the grime of conflict still upon their brown faces, and garments foul with smoke and dust. It seemed to Appleby that he would never again sit down with so incongruous a company. At last, when all had eaten or made a pretence of it, there was a curious stillness as Maccario stood up at the head of the table. Every eye was turned upon him, and the olive-tinted faces grew intent, for among those who

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

watched him were men who knew that their ruin or prosperity depended upon what he had to say.

"What we have accomplished to-day will last," he said. "The flag of Spain will never float over Santa Marta again."

There was a murmur from the Sin Verguenza, and Appleby saw the faces of one or two of the loyalists harden, while the rest grew anxious. Maccario, however, smiled as he proceeded.

"A wise man yields to the inevitable," he said. "The Sin Verguenza hold this town, and you have seen that from here to the mountains the country has declared for liberty. Men are flocking in, and there are rifles to arm the battalions we are raising in the cuartel. War with the Americans is now certain, and there can be only one result of that war, my friends, while Santa Marta stands alone, a place of no importance to the Spanish generals, who will be too busy to trouble about what happens there. Now you comprehend the position."

He stopped, and it was evident that none of the loyalists could controvert him, though one rose to his feet.

"It is admitted, señor," he said gravely. "What follows?"

"That," said Maccario, "is for you and the others to decide. Martial law that will grind those who rebel against it into the dust, or, I think, prosperity, with due submission to a provisional administration. You see before you the head of it, and, at least, there will not be anarchy while he has two or three strong battalions to do his bidding. In the meanwhile the direction of affairs will be placed in the hands of ten men. Five will be nominated by myself, and I will ask your Alcalde to summon four others when he has consulted the wishes of the citizens."

There was a murmur of relief and astonishment, for this was apparently the last thing the loyalists had expected, while Appleby, who glanced at Maccario, was sensible of a slight embarrassment, when he saw the little dry smile on his comrade's face. The leader of the Sin Verguenza had, it seemed, guessed his thoughts, and he was glad when the Alcalde, a gray-haired, courtly man, stood up.

"It is not what we looked for, señor, and on behalf of Santa Marta you have our gratitude," he said. "Still, while

STRUCK OFF THE ROLL

others may be willing, I, at least, can hold no office under an insurgent usurpation."

There was an angry murmur from the Sin Verguenza, but the Alcalde stood very erect, gazing at them disdainfully, and Maccario raised his hand.

"The Alcalde is, I think, scarcely wise, but he is a loyal gentleman," he said. "We will pass over him. The Señor Sanchez who, I am told, is regarded with respect in Santa Marta, will, perhaps, recommend five citizens of integrity."

A slight, olive-faced gentleman in white duck stood up. "Since we have been beaten I agree," he said. "One has, however, questions to ask. There will be an amnesty to those who have supported Morales, and their possessions will be made secure to them?"

A little grim twinkle crept into Maccario's eyes. "Every citizen of means will be required to contribute to the equipment of the new battalions to be raised and the cost of administration, in proportion to his income, as the council shall decide. If there are any who desire to show their contrition for past hostility by being generous now they will have an opportunity. There are also one or two to whom such a course is recommended."

More than one of the company glanced at his neighbor uneasily, but the man who had spoken turned to Maccario with a little expressive gesture. "Then I will go now to consult with and spread the good news among the citizens," he said.

Maccario laughed softly. "They will no doubt be astonished. To them the Sin Verguenza have been as wolves, but that was the fault of Morales, who made them so. Now they are the bloodhounds who, while the household sleep in peace, keep watch in the patio. Still, the bloodhound is a beast that one would do well to beware of, my friend. Well, I will not keep the gentlemen who have honored us with their company, but there is a toast to drink, and you who have made plantations and built warehouses, and we who have marched and fought, can join in it equally. To the prosperity of Cuba!"

The men rose as one, the loyalists with evident relief that nothing more had been asked of them, and as they swung up their glasses the building rang with the shout,

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

Then in the silence that followed the Alcalde filled his glass again.

"And," he said, "to Spain!"

Maccario made him a little ceremonious inclination. "Señor," he said, "with ten such men on the council one would have no fear concerning the prosperity of Santa Marta."

Then the citizens went out, and Maccario smiled as he turned to Appleby.

"It seems that the time of the friends of liberty has come," he said. "There will no doubt be preferment for those who have fought well, but the promise you made us was to hold only until Santa Marta had fallen."

Appleby was almost astonished to find himself troubled by a keen sense of regret. "I take it back," he said quietly. "You will now find plenty of other men willing to take my place with the Sin Verguenza."

"It is likely, but none that one could trust so well. Still, you will not be hasty. It is a good life, Bernardino — ours of the march and bivouac. Would you be happier counting the dollars in American cities than watching the Cuban highways or lying on the hillsides by the red fires? To gain one thing one must always give up another, and would not such a man as you are prefer to decide the fate of cities and battalions than haggle over a bargain? It is command, the stress of effort, and the untrammelled joy of life, sunshine, and wine, we offer you, while one lives in bonds and sadly in your Northern cities."

Appleby sighed a little, for the temptation was alluring, but he knew the shadowy side of the life the Sin Verguenza led, and he kept his head.

"I have made my decision, and the Señor Harding waits for me," he said.

Maccario smiled. "Then I shall gain nothing by objecting. After all, it is of no great importance whether a man trades as a merchant or fights as a soldier. That will be as fate arranges it for him. He is born what he is."

"The Señor Appleby will leave us?" asked one of the men.

"Yes," said Maccario, who stood up, "when it pleases him, and I think it is scarcely likely we shall sit at meat with him again. You will pledge a faithful comrade and a valiant

STRUCK OFF THE ROLL

soldier, without whom we might never have been the masters of Santa Marta."

The men were on their feet in a moment, and Appleby felt his heart throb as he glanced down the long row of faces. Many were still grimed with dust, and the brown hands that held the glasses stained with the black fouling from the rifles, but there was no mistaking the good will in the dark eyes. Then the glasses went up with a shout that filled the great room and rang out through the open windows across the silent town, and Appleby, who never remembered what he said, found himself speaking hoarsely.

He sat down while the shouting broke out again, and saw a man in the doorway signing to him.

"The Señor Palliser is permitted to see you. It is recommended that you lose no time," he said when there was silence.

Maccario laid his hand sympathetically upon Appleby's arm. "It is well to be prepared," he said. "I am afraid that by to-morrow there will be another of your countrymen struck off the roll of the Sin Verguenza."

Appleby rose and followed the man with his heart beating painfully, and it was only by an effort he retained his tranquillity when he was led into a room in the banker's house where a lamp was burning. Its flame flickered in the draught, for the lattices were open wide, but it showed the drawn white face that was turned expectantly towards the door.

"I am glad you have come," said the wounded man. "I don't think I realized what was going to happen, or where I was, until an hour ago, and then I was horribly afraid the man would n't find you. You see, I don't suppose there's more than another hour or two left me now."

Appleby set his lips as he glanced down at the white face, and felt that this was true. Then his eyes grew a trifle dim as he laid his hand on Tony's arm.

"Why," he said hoarsely, "did I ever let you go?"

Tony smiled. "There is no necessity to reproach yourself. You know just as well as I do that you could not have stopped me, and I'm not sure that after all I'm very sorry. There is nobody who will not get on just as well without me."

"You are wrong. There is not a man at Northrop who will not feel the blow — and there is Violet."

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

Tony's fingers seemed to quiver. "Still!" he said very slowly, "I think she will get over it."

Appleby said nothing for a few moments, for there was something he could not understand in his comrade's face. Then he said softly, "How did it happen, Tony?"

Tony shook his head. "I can't quite remember. I saw that cazador with the bayonet, and went for him with the butt," he said. "The only thing I am sure about is that he got me instead."

Appleby gasped as the vague memories of the struggle on the veranda grew clearer. "Tony, you thrust yourself in between him and me?"

Tony smiled a little. "Well," he said slowly, "it seemed even chances that I could reach him with the butt, and I owed you a good deal, you see."

Appleby clenched one hand, and turned his face away, and there was for a full minute silence in the dimly lighted room while he looked out through the square of open casement at the dusky blueness of the night. Then through the hum of voices in the street below there came a rhythmic tramp of feet and a thin jingle of steel, while as it grew louder the glare of waving torches shone into the room. Tony watched it flicker upon the wall.

"What is going on?" he said.

"They are carrying Morales to his burial," said Appleby. "Maccario has sent a half-company of the Sin Verguenza."

Tony smiled curiously. "That man has good taste. I liked him," he said. "Well, there is one of the Sin Verguenza who will never march again. I wonder if you remember that two of our family once fought with the Legitimists in Spain. Still, I think they would have looked down upon the Sin Verguenza."

Again Appleby, struggling with tense emotion, found words failed him, and sat silent until Tony laid his hand on his.

"It might have been better if I had never fallen in love with Violet," he said.

"Why?" said Appleby, who fancied that Tony was watching him curiously. "She was in love with you."

"I think not," and Tony feebly shook his head. "It is n't necessary to discuss that again."

STRUCK OFF THE ROLL

He stopped with a little shiver, and Appleby's fingers closed tightly on his hand.

"If I could only bring you back to her you would find out how mistaken you are."

"That is evidently out of the question. Nobody could, and I think if a little longer life had been granted me I would have tried to give her up. I know now that she would never have been happy with me. Still, you will tell her, Bernard — what has happened to me."

Appleby only pressed his hand, and it was a minute or two later when Tony spoke again.

"There is one man who would please Violet — and I don't think I would mind," he said.

Again Appleby felt the blood in his forehead. "She never thought of me, and I have nothing to offer her," he said.

"No," said Tony with a visible effort. "Still, I think, Bernard — if you saw much of her she would. You have both done a good deal for me."

He stopped with a gasp, and seemed to sink into sleep or partial stupor, while Appleby sat very still listening to the voices in the street below while half an hour dragged by. Then Tony opened his eyes, and looked about him vacantly.

"I think I've been dreaming, and that song Hester was fond of is running in my head," he said. "The one about the gates — it got hold of my fancy — I think they were of precious stones. She and Violet were out on the lawn of Low Wood — where you look down into the valley, you know — and Nettie was trying to convince the vicar those gates could be stormed. There was something I could n't quite understand about the marble knight in Northrop church."

Appleby saw that Tony's thoughts were wandering.

"Of course!" he said soothingly, though his voice was strained. "I would n't worry about it, Tony."

Tony looked at him as though he scarcely recognized him, and smiled.

"I think you're wrong, and perhaps it is n't necessary. That song is jingling in my head again. 'If you but touch with your finger tips those ivory gates and golden.' It sounds easy," he said.

His head sank back on the pillow, and for five long minutes

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

there was silence in the room. Then Tony sighed, and his fingers closed feebly on Appleby's hand.

"It's very hot in the sun here, and it was yesterday when I had a meal," he said. "Still, I shall find Bernard. Now they're marching on Santa Marta in open fours. They're going in — nothing could stop the Sin Verguenza — but you can't open those gates with a volley. It is n't necessary."

He said nothing more, and when another half-hour had dragged by Appleby rose, and with gentle force drew his hand away. Then he went out, shivering a little and treading softly, for he knew that the soul of Tony Palliser, who had sinned and made such reparation as was permitted him, was knocking at the gates which are made of precious stones.

XXXII

APPLEBY LEAVES SANTA MARTA

THE sun was low, and the town lay in grateful shadow when Appleby walked slowly down the calle that leads out of Santa Marta. He was dressed plainly in white duck, and no longer carried a rifle, while he scarcely seemed to hear the observations of Harper, who walked at his side. His brown face was a trifle grave, and Maccario, who went with them, smiled dryly when he noticed that once or twice he sighed.

Stone pavements and white walls were hot still, but the dazzling glare had faded, and the street was thronged with citizens enjoying the faint coolness of the evening. Here and there one of them greeted the little group with signs of respect, but Appleby scarcely noticed them. Looking straight before him he saw the shattered lattices, and the scars and stains of smoke on the white walls which marked the scene of the last grim struggle with Morales. Morales lay at rest in the little campo santo, and in a few more minutes Appleby would in all probability have turned his back forever on Santa Marta. It was with confused feelings, through which there ran a keen regret, he remembered what had befallen him there.

Then, as they approached the strip of uneven pavement hastily flung down on the spot where the Sin Verguenza had only a few days ago swept over the barricade, he stopped a moment as brown-faced men with rifles, regardless of discipline — which was, however, seldom much in evidence among the Sin Verguenza — thronged about him. Amidst cries and gesticulations they thumped his shoulders and wrung his hands, while once more Appleby wondered whether he had decided wisely as he recognized the sincerity of the good will in their dark eyes. He had fought with them, faced imminent peril, borne with anxiety and short-comings, and feasted

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

riotously, in their company, and now he found it harder to part from them than it would have been from more estimable men.

Maccario, it seemed, understood what he was thinking, for his face was sympathetic as he glanced at his companion.

"One would fancy that they were sorry to let you go," he said. "It is a good life, a man's life, the one you are leaving. Will you find better comrades in your smoky cities?"

Appleby smiled a trifle wistfully, and did not answer for a moment. The vivid, untrammelled life appealed to him, and for a time he had found delight in it, but he was wise, and knew that once peace was established there would be no room in Cuba for the Sin Verguenza. They must once more become toilers, or descend to intrigue and conspiracy, and he knew the Castilian jealousy of the alien, and that past services are lightly remembered in the day of prosperity. He and his comrades had borne the stress and the strain, and it seemed wiser to leave them now before the distrust and dissension came.

"None better to face peril or adversity with, but a change is coming, and one cannot always wear the bandolier," he said. "If I go now they will only think well of me."

A little gleam of comprehension came into Maccario's dark eyes. "Still," he said slowly, "the Sin Verguenza will be remembered, and you with them."

Then a man leading two mules on which their baggage was strapped came up, and Maccario held out his hand.

"Good-bye," said Appleby simply. "I shall hope for your prosperity."

He laid his foot in the stirrup, and Maccario swept off his hat.

"While there is one of the Sin Verguenza left you will never be without a friend in Cuba," he said.

Appleby swung himself to the saddle, Harper mounted clumsily, and there was a beat of hoofs; but in a minute or two Appleby drew bridle, and twisted himself round in his saddle. With the two church towers rising high above it against the paling sky Santa Marta lay, still gleaming faintly white, upon the dusky plain behind him, and he fancied he could see Maccario standing motionless in the gap between the houses where the last fight had been. A cheerful hum of

'APPLEBY LEAVES SANTA MARTA'

voices and a tinkle of guitars drifted out with a hot and musky smell from the close-packed town, and he turned his eyes away and glanced at the tall black cross on a rise outside the walls. Anthony Palliser of Northrop slept beneath it among the Sin Verguenza.

Then the crash of the sunset gun rose from the cuartel, and there was a roll of drums, the drums of the cazadores beaten by insurgent hands, and with a little sigh Appleby shook his bridle. He could picture his comrades laughing over their wine in the cafés, or mingling with the light-hearted crowd in the plaza, but he would never meet their badinage or see them sweeping through the smoke and dust again.

"It was pleasant while it lasted, and who knows what is in front of us now?" he said.

Harper, lurching in his saddle, laughed a little. "Well," he said, "one gets accustomed to changes in this country, and I can hear the sea."

"Then you have good ears. We may have trouble before we reach it," said Appleby dryly.

They pushed on through the coolness of the night until the stars were growing dim in the eastern sky, and then rested in a little aldea until dusk came round again. The Sin Verguenza were masters of the country round Santa Marta, but sympathies were as yet divided in the region between it and the sea, and Appleby decided that it was advisable to travel circumspectly. Events proved him right, for two days later they narrowly avoided an encounter with a company of loyalist troops, and spent the next week lying close by day, and plodding by bypaths through the cane at night, while it became evident to both of them that they would never have reached the coast without the credentials with which Maccario had supplied them.

They found it was watched by gunboats when at last they reached a lagoon among the mangrove swamps, and were assured that it would be perilous to attempt to get on board a steamer in any of the ports. A small vessel with arms was expected, but when Appleby heard that she might not arrive for a month, and perhaps land her freight somewhere else, he decided to buy a fishing barquillo and put to sea at once. Harper concurred in this, and said there was little doubt that they would intercept one of the steamers from Havana.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

The night was clearer than they cared about when with the big latine set they slipped out of the lagoon, but the land breeze, which was blowing fresh, drove steamy vapors across the moon and it was almost dark when they reeled into the white surf on the bar. They went through it shipping water at every plunge, Harper sitting high on the boat's quarter with his hand on the tiller and the sheet of the latine round his other wrist, while Appleby crouched among the ballast and bailed. Then the sea grew smooth again, save for the little white ripples made by the hot breeze, and Appleby, standing up ankle-deep in water, looked about him.

The mangroves lay behind him, a dusky blur streaked with a thick white steam which trailed out in long wisps across the sea that heaved blackly beneath the boat. Then the trees were blotted out as she ran into a denser belt of mist that was heavy with a hot, sour smell, and there was nothing to be seen but a strip of shining water shut in by sliding haze when she came out again. Appleby glanced at the froth that swirled past the gunwale, and turned to Harper.

"She is travelling fast, and we should be clear of the land by sunrise," he said.

Harper glanced up at the moon. "If it had been darker it would have suited me just as well," he said. "The trouble is that if a gunboat came along you wouldn't see her in the mist."

"Still, that should cut both ways."

Harper shook his head. "It's not easy to make a boat out until you're close up with her, but you can see a steamer quite a long way off," he said.

Appleby said nothing further for a while, and the boat's gunwale became level with the froth that splashed about it, for the breeze freshened as they drew out from the land. A thin wisp of haze had stretched across the moon and dimmed the silvery light, but there was a wide strip of faintly shining water in front of them when he fancied he caught a faint, pulsating sound.

"You hear it?" he said.

"Oh yes," said Harper dryly. "It's a steamer's engines. I kind of fancy she's outside of us."

They strained their ears to listen, but it is difficult to locate a sound among belts of haze, and when at last the measured

APPLEBY LEAVES SANTA MARTA

throbbing was unpleasantly distinct Harper held up his hand.

"They're shoving her along, and she's not far away, but that's 'bout all I know," he said. "Get forward, and drop the latine."

Appleby did as he was bidden, and stood staring forward in the bows when the sail came down. The boat lay plunging on the heave that was streaked with flecks of froth, and there was a long trail of sliding haze not far away from them. From out of it came the sound of water parting under iron bows. Then two tall spars that swung a little rose out of the vapor, and next moment a blur of shadowy hull grew into visibility. It lengthened rapidly, a smear of smoke streamed across the sea, but there was no blink of light beneath it, and with the froth piled up at her bows the vessel came down upon them, portentous in her blackness and silence.

"A gunboat sure!" said Harper. "Lie down."

Appleby crouched at the foot of the mast with straining eyes. He could see the long black strip of hull swing with the heave until all the deck, which caught a flash of the dim moonlight, was visible. Then it swung back with slanted spars and funnel, and there was a white frothing about the tip of the lifted screw. It was evident that the gunboat would pass them unpleasantly close, and already the black shape of the man upon her forecastle was discernible against the sky, while hazy figures upon her slanting bridge grew into sharper form, and it seemed to Appleby that they could scarcely escape observation. Still, a boat lying low on the dusky water is difficult to see, and while he held his breath the war vessel drew abreast of them.

The roar of flung-up water and the pounding of engines throbbed about him, he could see a man upon the inclined deck clutch at something as she rolled, and now the funnel was level with him and a strip of streaming plates was lifted from the brine. It swept by, there was a swirl and a thudding beneath the lifted stern, and then the steamer grew dimmer while the boat lurched on the wake of throbbing screw.

"Now," said Harper with a little gasp, "when you can get the latine up we'll go on again."

It cost Appleby an effort to hoist the thrashing sail, but when it was set and the sheet hauled aft Harper laughed softly

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

as the boat swung away buoyantly with her gunwales dipping in the foam.

"We'll be in the steamboat track by sun-up, and there'll be no wind then," he said. "Considering that each time you see a trail of smoke you may have to pull two or three miles, it would be kind of sensible to sleep when you can."

Appleby lay down on the wet floorings with an old sail over him, and for a time felt the swift swing of the little craft, and heard the gurgling swirl of brine, for the breeze she sped before was now breaking the heave into splashing seas. Then he became oblivious to everything save when a little shower of spray blew into his face. At last he fancied that Harper was trying to stir him with his foot, and blinked at him vacantly, until Harper kicked him harder.

"Get up!" he said.

There was a tone in his voice which roused Appleby suddenly, and standing up he stared about him.

"Another gunboat?" he said.

"Look!" said Harper, pointing with his hand. "It can't do much good, but you may as well get the sail off her."

Appleby swung round, and saw that the moon was dim and low, though a faint light still shone down upon the white-flecked sea. Then he made out a black smear that moved across it amidst a turmoil of foam and a haze of smoke. It grew larger while he watched it, and there was a red streak of flame from one of the two funnels that took shape rapidly, but he could see no masts or hull, and the speed with which the smoke haze was coming on appeared incredible. Then he sprang forward, and lowered the latine into the boat.

"A big torpedo boat, or a destroyer," said Harper. "She'll pass 'bout quarter of a mile off, and we're going to make nothing by running away from her. It's just a question whether they see us or not."

The dim shape had grown clearer while he spoke, and a strip of something black appeared between the smoke cloud and the piled-up froth. Then a slender whip of mast stood out against the sky, and from the crown of the after funnel there poured another gush of flame. The craft was almost level with them now, but it was evident that in another minute or two she would have passed and be fading again, and Appleby felt his heart throb painfully as he watched her.

APPLEBY LEAVES SANTA MARTA

Then the white wash about her seemed to swirl higher, funnels and mast slanted sharply, and the half-seen hull shortened. Appleby looked at Harper, who made a little gesture of resignation.

"Yes," he said. "They've seen us. She's coming round."

A moment later a whistle rang out, and while Appleby sat down grim in face the white wave that frothed about the stranger's hull grew less noticeable. The smoke cloud also sank a little, and in a minute or two more a strip of lean black hull slid smoothly past them. Then he gasped as a voice came down across the waters.

"Boat ahoy? Get your oars out, and pull up alongside," it said.

They had the balanced sweeps out in a moment, and pulled with a will, while when they reached the craft that lay waiting them an officer stood by an opening in her rail. He spoke to them in Castilian, but Harper laughed, for he had recognized his uniform.

"I've no use for that talk," he said. "Get your ladder over!"

It was done, and in another moment he and Appleby stood on the torpedo boat's deck, where a couple of officers stared at them.

"Since you're not Cubans, where were you going in that boat?" said one.

"I guess you'd better take us right along to your commander," said Harper. "Are n't you going to shake hands with a countryman, anyway?"

The officer laughed. "I'll wait," he said dryly, "until I've heard what you have to say. Did n't you make your boat fast before you left her?"

"No, sir," said Harper. "We have no more use for her. We're coming along with you."

"Well, I guess we can pick her up again if that does n't suit our commander," said the officer.

He led them aft to a little cabin, and left them there until a young officer came in. He sat down on the opposite side of the little table and looked at them.

"You have n't the appearance of Cubans, in spite of your clothes," he said. "Now, I'll ask you for a straight tale. What brought you off the land in a boat of that kind?"

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"A wish to get as far away from Cuba by sunrise as we could," said Appleby.

"What did you want to get out of Cuba for?"

"Is there any special reason why I should tell you?" asked Appleby, who was a trifle nettled.

"It seems to me there is. Anyway, back you go into your boat unless you satisfy me."

Appleby looked at the man a moment, and was pleasantly impressed, in spite of the abruptness of his manner. He had a quiet bronzed face and steady eyes, while the faint ring of command in his voice did not seem out of keeping with them.

"Then if you will listen for a minute or two I will try to tell you," he said.

"Quick as you can!"

Appleby spoke rapidly, disregarding Harper, who seemed anxious to tell the story too, and the commander nodded.

"Who is the American that employed you?" he said.

"Cyrus P. Harding."

The commander, who started, cast a swift glance at him, and then rising abruptly signed to a man at the door.

"Tell Lieutenant Stalker he may go ahead, as we were steering, full speed," he said.

The man went away, and in another moment or two the frail hull quivered until the deck beams rattled above them. Then while the splash of flung-off water swelled into a deep pulsating sound it seemed to leap onward under them, and the commander sat down again, looking at Appleby with a curious little smile in his eyes.

"I have n't asked your name yet, and scarcely think it's necessary," he said. "So far as my duty permits, you can count upon my doing everything I can to meet your wishes, Mr. Appleby."

Appleby stared at him. "I appreciate your offer, though I don't quite understand it yet," he said.

"Well," said the commander with a pleasant laugh, "my name is Julian Savine, and I have been hoping that I should come across you for a long while. It is quite likely you have heard Miss Harding mention me."

Appleby felt the blood creep into his face, and recognized that this was the last thing he could have wished for, but he met Savine's gaze steadily.

APPLEBY LEAVES SANTA MARTA

"I have," he said slowly. "I fancy Miss Harding has shown herself a good friend to me."

Savine stretched out a brown hand. "Well," he said, "I hope you will also count me in. And now, if you will excuse me, I have something to tell my lieutenant. In the meanwhile I'll send the steward along."

He went out, and Harper grinned at Appleby. "That," he said reflectively, "is the kind of man we raise in my country. He has heard about the night you took her in. The question is how much did Miss Harding know or think fit to tell him?"

"Yes," said Appleby grimly, "it is just that point which is worrying me."

The steward brought them in a meal, but it was a little while before Savine appeared again. He opened a box of cigars, and though he said nothing that seemed to indicate that Harper's company was not altogether necessary the latter rose.

"I guess I'll go out and see how she's getting along," he said.

Then there was a little silence, until Appleby glanced at the commander.

"I have been thinking hard during the last half-hour, and I am now going to tell you exactly what happened on the night I met Miss Harding in Santa Marta," he said. "I scarcely think you have heard it in quite the same shape before, and I was not sure that it would have been altogether advisable a little while ago."

"I don't know that it is necessary. Still, you might go on."

Appleby told his story with almost brutal frankness, and then looked the commander in the eyes.

"If you have the slightest doubt on any point you may never have such an opportunity of getting rid of it again," he said.

Savine smiled a little, though there was the faintest tinge of darker color in his bronzed cheek.

"I never had any, and now there is nothing I could do which would quite wipe out the obligation I feel I am under to you," he said.

He stopped with a curious little gleam in his eyes, and Appleby felt that he had made another friend who would not

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

fail him. Then he turned the conversation, and Savine told him that he was engaged on special service on the Cuban coast when he saw the boat and decided to intercept her in the hope of acquiring information. Hostilities were certain, but he hoped to put his guests on board a steamer he expected to fall in with on the morrow.

XXXIII

VIOLET REGAINS HER LIBERTY

THE light was fading when Violet Wayne lay in a low chair by the fire in Hester Earle's drawing-room. A bitter wind wailed dolefully outside among the swaying trees, and the room was growing dusky, but now and then a flickering blaze from the hearth forced up the girl's face out of the shadow. It was, so Hester who sat opposite her fancied, curiously weary, and there was a suggestive listlessness in her attitude. She had, though few of those who met her would have suspected it, been living under a constant strain during the last two or three months, and it was a relief to feel that for the time at least she could relax her efforts to preserve her customary serenity. Hester evidently understood this, for she was a young woman of discernment, and the two were close friends.

"I am glad you have asked the Cochrane girls to stay with you, Violet," she said. "I think you need stirring up, and though there is not a great deal in Lily Cochrane or her sister, nobody could accuse them of undue quietness. They are coming?"

"I believe so, but Lily seemed uncertain whether she could get away, and was to telegraph us to-night. Still, I almost fancy I would rather be without them. There are times when one scarcely feels equal to entertaining anybody."

Hester nodded sympathetically. "Of course, but it is in just such cases the effort is most likely to prove beneficial," she said. "Have you had any word from Tony since he left?"

"Two or three lines written in pencil from Havana. He was going into the country to find Mr. Appleby."

Hester gazed thoughtfully at the fire for awhile, and then suddenly fixed her eyes upon her companion's face.

"We have been friends since the time we wore short frocks,

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

and that implies a good deal," she said. "Now, it is a little more difficult to deceive me than the rest — and I have been concerned about you lately. I wonder if I dare ask you if you have quite forgiven Tony?"

"I don't know"; and Violet's voice was a trifle strained. "I feel that I should — but it is difficult, and I can't convince myself. It may be a little easier by and by."

Hester made a little sympathetic gesture, though she was almost astonished, for it was seldom that Violet Wayne revealed her feelings.

"Still, we understood that you would marry him when he came back," she said.

Her companion sat still for almost a minute, while the flickering firelight showed the pain in her face. Ever since the shock of Nettie Harding's disclosure had passed she had grappled with the question Hester had suggested, and striven to reconcile herself to the answer. Tony had been suddenly revealed to her as he was, and the love she had once cherished had not survived her belief in him, but there was in her a depth of almost maternal tenderness and compassion which few suspected, and the man's feebleness appealed to it. She knew how he clung to her, and that if she cast him off he would inevitably sink. There was a trace of contempt in her compassion as she realized it, and yet she had been fond of him, and he had many lovable qualities. She had also made him a promise, and his ring was still upon her hand, while she reflected with a tinge of bitterness that it is not wise to expect too much, and that men of stainless character were doubtless singularly scarce. The joy of life had vanished, but she felt that Tony's fate was in her hands, and the duty, at least, remained.

"Yes," she said very slowly. "If he still wishes it when he comes back."

Hester nodded gravely. "I think you are right," she said. "Tony will wipe the blunder out when he has you to prompt him, but I think he would go to pieces if you sent him away. Of course, it is not everybody who would feel it — but it is — a responsibility. You can, you see, make whatever you wish of him."

"One would esteem a man with the qualities which make that easy?" said Violet, with a little weary smile.

VIOLET REGAINS HER LIBERTY

"They might occasionally prove convenient in one's husband," said Hester, with a faint twinkle in her eyes.

Her companion seemed to shiver. "I wonder what Tony is doing now," she said. "It is, at least, hot and bright in Cuba, and if I had only known when he was coming back we would have gone away to the Riviera." Then she straightened herself a little. "Isn't it time your father arrived?"

Hester smiled, and wondered if Violet was already sorry that she had unbent so far.

"He should be here at any minute unless the train is late," she said, and, feeling that her companion would prefer it, plunged into a discussion of Northrop affairs.

While she made the most of each triviality there was a rattle of wheels outside, and Mr. Earle came in. He shook hands with Violet, and stood a moment or two by the fire.

"I had expected to find your mother here," he said.

"It was a bitter afternoon, and I persuaded her to stay at home."

The man took a pink envelope out of his pocket, and handed it her.

"I passed the post-office lad walking his bicycle over a very soft piece of road, and pulled up to ask if he had anything for me," he said. "When I found he had only a telegram for your mother I offered to bring it on, and he seemed quite willing to let me. The vicar hasn't turned up yet, Hester?"

"No," said Hester. "I am expecting him."

Earle went out, and Hester proceeded with the account of a recent dance which she had been engaged in when he came in, while Violet turned over the telegram.

"It will be from Lily Cochrane to tell us she is coming, and I think I'll open it," she said.

Hester nodded. "Ada Whittingham in green — there are people who really have no sense of fitness," she said. "The effect was positively startling."

Violet tore open the envelope, and gasped, while the words she read grew blurred before her eyes. For a moment or two she could scarcely grasp their meaning, and sat staring at the message, and trying vainly to read it again. The branch of a trailer rose rapped upon the window as it swayed in the moaning wind, and Hester ran on.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"Lottie had out her diamonds, the whole of them — somewhat defective taste considering the character of the affair. Mrs. Pechereau was there with Muriel in a black gown I've seen already — one would never fancy she was that girl's mother."

Violet closed her fingers tight upon the telegram, for her companion's prolixity was growing unendurable, and she wanted quietness to realize what had befallen her. The fire-light had died away, and, now her senses were rallying, she could not read the message. Then a faint flicker sprang up again, and Hester, glancing round, saw the tension in her face.

"You're not listening," she said. "Why, what is the matter? Is n't Lily coming?"

Violet rose up with a curious slow movement, and her face showed almost as pallid as the white marble of the mantle she leaned against. Then a little quiver ran through her, and the fingers of one hand trembled upon the stone.

"I don't know," she said. "Let me be quiet for a moment, Hester!"

Hester rose, and laid a hand restrainingly upon her arm. "Can't you tell me? What has gone wrong?"

Violet let the telegram fall, and turned a cold, still face towards her.

"Tony is dead," she said, and sank back, shivering, into her chair.

"Oh," said Hester, "I am so sorry!"

The words were sincere enough, but just then the conventionality of them appeared incongruous, and when Violet made no answer Hester picked up the telegram and held it near the fire.

"Anthony Palliser killed in action, Santa Marta, Cuba. Particulars personally. Sailing New York Saturday, Bernard Appleby," she read.

Then for the space of minutes there was silence in the room save for the wail of the bitter wind outside, and Violet lay staring at the fire with vacant eyes. Hester found it becoming unendurable, and touched her companion gently.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" she said.

"No," said Violet, with a visible effort as she rose. "I think I will go home. You will tell your father and the

VIOLET REGAINS HER LIBERTY

vicar, Hester. I can get my hat and wraps myself. I don't wish you to come with me."

She straightened herself slowly and passed out of the room, while when she entered it again dressed for the drive Mr. Earle laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"You have our sincere sympathy, but I can't help fancying that it is not altogether hopeless yet," he said.

The girl looked up at him with incredulity in her eyes.

"You must know it is. What do you mean?" she said.

"Well," said Earle, with a glance at the vicar, who had come in and heard the news, "it is a little difficult to make clear. Still, you see, my dear, that men who do not answer to the roll after a battle now and then turn up again. A blunder may have been made in the confusion, while we do not after all know anything very much to the credit of Mr. Appleby. I would suggest that your mother ask lawyer Craythorne to meet him. Men are apt to believe what they wish to now and then."

"I don't in the least understand you."

Earle appeared disconcerted. "If this distressful news were true Appleby would be the gainer."

Once more the girl looked up with a chilling serenity that unpleasantly affected him.

"There is no hope left," she said. "The man who sent the message made absolutely certain or he would never have written it."

Earle glanced at the vicar, who nodded gravely.

"I wish I had not to admit it, but I feel that Violet is right," he said. "Would you like me to drive over with you, my dear?"

"No," said the girl quietly. "I would much sooner be alone."

She passed out from among them, and Earle turned to the vicar again.

"It does not sound charitable, and I fancy you and Hester know rather more about the affair than I do, but I can't help believing that Tony could not have done Violet a greater kindness," he said. "I am, however, a trifle astonished that you seem to participate in the curious belief she evidently has in Appleby. You can't be well acquainted with him, and he is

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

taking a serious risk in coming here since there is still a warrant out for him."

The vicar smiled. "I have heard a little about him, and I scarcely think he would let the fact you mention stop him carrying out what he felt was his duty."

The vicar's faith was warranted, for while Violet Wayne was driven home that evening with her thoughts in a whirl, and a remorseful tenderness which overlooked the dead man's shortcomings bringing a mist to her eyes, Appleby sat under the electric lights in a room of a great New York building. He felt the pulsations of a vast activity about him, for the thick doors and maple partitions could not shut out the whir of the elevators, tinkle of telephone bells, murmur of voices, and patter of hasty feet, though his eyes were on the agreement bond he was attaching his name to.

Harding, who sat opposite him, smiled as he laid down the pen.

"Now I guess that's all fixed up, and I don't think I'm going to be sorry I took you into the business," he said. "You'll draw 'most enough already to live out on the Hudson if it pleases you, and, so far as I can figure, we'll roll in money once we get the sugar trade going again. You'll go right back and straighten up when we've whipped the Spaniards out of Cuba."

"I'm afraid I have scarcely deserved all you have offered me, sir," said Appleby, whose fingers trembled a little as he took up the document. "Nobody could have anticipated this result when I came across you on board the 'Aurania.'"

Harding rose, and opening a cupboard took out a bottle and two glasses, which he filled to the brim.

"I've no great use for this kind of thing in business hours as a rule, but the occasion warrants it, and I believe only Austrian princes and their ministers drink that wine," he said. "Well, here's my partner's prosperity!"

They touched glasses, and a flush crept to Appleby's forehead, while there was a little kindly gleam in Harding's eyes.

"I'm grateful, sir," said Appleby, and stopped abruptly.

Harding laughed. "Now, don't worry," he said. "I've no use for speeches, and am going to get my money out of you. This is a business deal, and there's something else to

VIOLET REGAINS HER LIBERTY

go into. You have quite fixed to sail in the 'Cunarder' on Saturday?"

"Yes. Still, I should not be much more than three weeks away."

"Well," said Harding a trifle dryly, "I don't quite know. I think Nettie told me there was a warrant out for you, and I believe it's quite difficult to get round the police in your country."

"I must take my chances. There is a woman in England that Tony Palliser was to have married. He expected me to go."

Harding looked at him curiously. "Oh, yes," he said. "Nettie told me about her. Well, I guess if you feel that way I have got to let you go, and I don't quite know I'm sorry you have these notions. They're a kind of warranty, and it was n't altogether because you've got in you the snap and grit that makes a man who can handle big affairs I made you my partner. Still, time's getting on, and Nettie is expecting us at Glenwood."

He summoned two clerks, who attested the agreement, and in another ten minutes they were waiting for the elevator, while late that night Appleby contrived to find Nettie Harding, who had been very gracious to him, alone. She was standing by the marble hearth in the great drawing-room where snapping logs of scented wood diffused a warmth and brightness which would, however, scarcely have kept the frost out but for the big furnace in the basement.

"What happened to-day has your approbation?" he said.

Nettie smiled. "Now, I think that is quite unnecessary when you know it has," she said.

"Perhaps it is. I can't help fancying you were not greatly astonished at your father's decision."

"Still," said the girl quietly, "I don't think I could coax Cyrus P. Harding into making a bad bargain. Besides, if I had a finger in it, is it more than any one would have expected?"

"I don't quite understand."

"No?" and Nettie smiled incredulously. "Well, you picked me up one night when I might have gone out over the rail on the 'Aurania.'"

"I don't think you could have managed it had you tried."

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

Nettie stood silent a moment, and then a little flush crept into her face, as she glanced down at the diamonds on her white wrists, and her long trailing dress. It was, Appleby fancied, of as costly fabric as the looms in Europe could produce.

"Well," she said with a curious little sparkle in her eyes, "there was another night I met you when I wasn't got up like this, and you were dressed in rags. Still, I knew that I could trust you. Do you believe that I should have been here, with everything that a woman could wish for, now, if I had not had that confidence?"

Appleby turned his eyes away, for certain fancies which had once or twice troubled him became certainties, and he recognized that the regard the girl had for him alone warranted the almost daring speech.

"I really don't remember very much about the night in question," he said. "Nobody in my place could. I was wounded slightly and almost dazed, you see."

Nettie smiled curiously. "That is, of course, just what one would have expected from you."

Appleby showed a faint trace of embarrassment. "I have been waiting most of the night to ask you a question," he said. "What did you say to Tony Palliser and Miss Wayne about me in England?"

"You will never find out — unless she tells you."

"That is most unlikely."

Nettie smiled in a curious fashion, and then looked him in the eyes.

"Well," she said reflectively, "I don't quite know. You have already got more than you ever expected, Mr. Appleby. Anyway, it is getting late, and you will excuse me now."

She moved away, and then, turning, stood smiling at him a moment by the door.

"Can't you tell me what you mean?" said Appleby, moving towards her with a little flush of color in his cheeks.

"You are going to England on Saturday," said Nettie, and slipped out of the door.

XXXIV

THE RIGHT MAN

IT was on the Saturday morning the "Cunarder's" passengers disembarked at Liverpool, and within an hour of the time the answer to the telegrams he despatched came to hand Appleby had started for Darsley. It was, however, late in the afternoon when he arrived there, and proceeded straight to Craythorne's office. The clerk's manner made it evident that he was expected, but he was a trifle astonished to find two other men beside the lawyer waiting him when he was shown into a lighted room.

Craythorne closed a little sliding window before he shook hands with him, and then turned to the others.

"This is Colonel Melton, appointed joint trustee with me by the will Anthony Palliser made the night he left for Cuba," he said. "I think you have met Mr. Earle. He came here with the sanction of Colonel Melton, and Esmond Palliser, on behalf of Miss Wayne, in case anything you have to tell us concerns her. He will, of course, withdraw if you wish it, though both he and Colonel Melton have long been confidential friends of the Palliser family."

Appleby greeted the two men, and then sat down with a little gleam in his eyes when Craythorne pointed to a chair.

"I should like to tell you that I left my business in New York and came here against my partner's wishes because I felt it was a duty I owed Miss Wayne and my late comrade's relatives," he said. "That was my only motive, and it seems to me desirable that you should realize it."

"You apparently do not know that you are a legatee under Anthony Palliser's will," said Craythorne.

"I was not even aware that he had made one, though he told me that he had made over Dane Cop to me."

Colonel Melton looked at Earle, and Craythorne, who took a document from a drawer, passed it to Appleby.

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

"Then you will be astonished to hear that the personal estate scheduled here was bequeathed to you?"

"I certainly am. I am also not sure that Tony had exactly the right to leave this property to me. Traditionally, and, I think, ethically, it belongs to the estate, and should revert to Esmond Palliser."

Colonel Melton appeared a trifle astonished, but Craythorne smiled dryly. "That is also Esmond Palliser's opinion, and he informed me that he intends to act upon it."

"He is, of course, at liberty"; and Appleby showed a trace of impatience. "His intentions do not, however, in the least concern me. Now, gentlemen, I have come here to tell you of my comrade's death, and I have another appointment to keep this evening."

Melton glanced at Craythorne, who nodded. "We will ask you to be as explicit as you can," he said.

Appleby spoke for rather more than ten minutes, and when he came to the assault upon Santa Marta it was evident that Colonel Melton was listening with eager interest. He turned to Appleby abruptly with a trace of embarrassment.

"I knew your father, Mr. Appleby," he said. "In fact, I once offended Godfrey Palliser by expressing my opinion of the fashion in which he treated him, and now I can only hope you will excuse the attitude I thought necessary when you came in. You did a thing not many drilled troops would have accomplished. A frontal attack in daylight, with a coverless strip to cross! They would have swept you out of existence with shrapnel."

"They had n't any"; and Appleby laughed.

"Still, they had two quick-firers, and your attack was directed at one narrow entrance," said Melton. "Now—"

Craythorne raised his hand. "I fancy it would be advisable to discuss these points later on," he said. "What we are immediately concerned with is the proof of Anthony Palliser's death."

"Precisely!" said Earle.

Melton flashed an angry glance at the lawyer, and Appleby's face became a trifle grim.

"I have here the depositions of two men who saw him buried attested by a Spanish notary, and am willing to make another now before a commissioner for oaths," he said. "My

THE RIGHT MAN

partner in New York will also testify to Tony's connection with the Sin Verguenza."

"And Miss Wayne, that he told her he was leaving for Cuba to find Mr. Appleby, if Craythorne is unwilling," said Melton.

Craythorne smiled and opened the little window. "Ask Mr. Gordon, the notary, to come here at once," he said.

"May we ask your partner's name?" said Earle.

"Cyrus P. Harding, New York," said Appleby.

Earle appeared astonished, and almost disconcerted. "I think that fact is sufficiently convincing," he said. "I am sure you will understand that it was necessary for us to proceed circumspectly, Mr. Appleby."

Again Craythorne smiled curiously. "I think Mr. Appleby understands the obligation placed on a trustee. In that respect alone our attitude was necessary."

Appleby flushed a trifle. "Still," he said, "I am glad you sent for a notary."

"Well," said Craythorne. "Dane Cop was not bequeathed to you in the event of his death by Anthony Palliser, but made over to you before he left for Cuba. It is yours absolutely, but in regard to the legacy it will be necessary to prove the will, and Esmond Palliser requested me to inform you that he purposed to contest your claim. I should suggest that you instruct a lawyer to confer with me."

"It will not be necessary, since I waive any right I may have. I do not intend to live in England, but to go back to New York almost immediately."

There was a murmur of astonishment, and Melton said, "I think that is unreasonably generous."

"No," said Appleby. "I scarcely fancy it is. Dane Cop is mine, and I shall hold on to it, but it would be difficult to get anything worth while out of the other property, which is after all of no great value, without personal supervision, and you may remember that there is still a warrant out for my apprehension."

Melton looked at his companions, and it was evident that they concurred with Craythorne when he said, "In the event of a trial you could clear yourself."

"Yes," said Appleby quietly, "I believe I could, but I have reasons for deciding not to run any risk of being com-

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

pelled to do so. My partner, who is acquainted with them, does not consider it necessary, and it is more than probable that the police have no longer any expectations of tracking me."

"You understand what you are purposing to do?" said Craythorne.

"It is, of course, quite clear to me. Still, I intend to remain in America."

There was a curious silence, and then Melton, moving forward, shook hands with Appleby.

"I have seldom heard of a finer thing than your decision, though after what I had seen of your father's life I should have expected it from you," he said. "With all respect to the Pallisers, none of them ever made so good a match as the one who married the ranker. While you remain at Northrop you will stay with me."

Earle smiled a little. "I must tell you, Mr. Appleby, that we understand your reasons — and appreciate them. Colonel Melton has, however, anticipated my intentions of offering you hospitality."

"You have evidently heard more than I hoped you would have done," said Appleby quietly.

"No," said Melton. "I, at least, know nothing, but I surmise a good deal. If I had not been your father's friend I should, however, never have grasped your motive."

Then the notary was shown in, and Earle rose. "We will wait in the other room," he said. "Mr. Appleby will no doubt have affairs to talk over with Craythorne."

It was half an hour later when Appleby came out, and found them waiting still. "I understand you are going on to see Miss Wayne, and I should be glad to drive you over," said Melton. "Then as you can't get back here to-night you will have to decide which of us shall have the pleasure of entertaining you. I don't wish to be unfair to Earle, but I think I am entitled to a preference."

Appleby felt curiously grateful to the gray-haired officer, but he smiled a little.

"I wonder if you realize what you are taking upon yourself, sir?" he said.

"If everybody at Northrop heard you were staying with me I should be especially pleased," said Melton gravely.

THE RIGHT MAN

"Still, in case you did not consider that convenient we will contrive to arrange it differently."

Appleby went with him, and an hour or two later was shown into Mrs. Wayne's drawing-room. He waited a little, with unpleasant misgivings, and his heart beating a trifle more rapidly than usual, and then felt a slight relief when Violet and her mother came in. The girl was dressed in a long robe of black that emphasized her pallor, but Appleby was reassured when he noticed her quiet composure.

"I felt that you would wish to see me, though I am afraid I can only cause you distress," he said.

Mrs. Wayne pointed to a chair. "You have come a long way," she said. "We appreciate the consideration for us that brought you."

"I had business with Mr. Craythorne," said Appleby, with a trace of embarrassment.

Then there was a silence he felt horribly unpleasant until Violet Wayne turned her eyes upon him.

"Will you tell us — everything — from the time you met Tony in Cuba? There is so much we wish to know," she said quietly.

Appleby, who wished that the obligation had not been laid on him, commenced abruptly in disjointed sentences, but the memories crowded upon him as he proceeded, and he became oblivious of everything but the necessity of making the most of Tony's part in them. The scenes he pictured became almost more real to him than when they were happening. He was once more in Cuba, and made his listeners see the sun-scorched hacienda, the long column crawling in the moonlight down the dim white road, the waves of dusky cane, and the glaring streets of Santa Marta. He felt they realized with him the tension of the silence until the rifles flashed, the flitting shadow that brushed through the cane, the tramp of weary feet, and the exultant shouts of the Sin Verguenza.

In the meanwhile the color appeared and faded in the girl's face, while now and then her lips would tremble and again set tight. Then as he came to the last struggle on the veranda he saw a glow in her eyes, and felt her intent gaze draw the picture out of him. At last she sank back in her chair with a little gasp, and Appleby, who knew he had never spoken in that fashion before, felt suddenly nerveless and

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

embarrassed. For almost a minute he sat staring vacantly in front of him, and then straightened himself with a little abrupt movement.

"I am afraid I have distressed you — but it seemed due to Tony that I should tell you this," he said.

Violet slowly raised her head, and looked at him with hazy eyes. "I think we shall always be grateful — and you must have felt it — you were his friend," she said. "I can't ask the questions I wish to know — you will come back again?"

Appleby rose, and Mrs. Wayne, who went out with him, turned to him in the hall.

"Are you staying any time at Darsley, Mr. Appleby?" she said. "We shall be pleased to see you."

"It was good of you to permit me to come once, madame," said Appleby. "It will be a week, at least, before I can get away, but I think a little reflection will convince you that it would be better if I did not come here again."

Mrs. Wayne looked at him quietly. "There is no reason why you should not. You will, of course, understand that Violet told me Miss Harding's story."

Appleby did not remember what he answered, but he drove away with a curious feeling of content, and Mrs. Wayne went back to the room where her daughter sat very still in her chair. Stooping down she kissed her gently.

"Did it hurt very much, Violet?" she said.

The girl seemed to shiver. "No," she said in a strained voice. "Not so much as I expected — in the way you mean. It was a splendid reparation Tony made."

Mrs. Wayne laid her hand caressingly on her daughter's hair. "You have told me very little, Violet — and people with your reserve find their troubles the harder to bear."

For a moment or two the girl gazed at the fire. "Mother, I must talk at last. I have almost a horror of myself," she said. "I was wickedly hard to Tony when Nettie Harding told me, and I felt very bitter against him when he went away. I could not overcome the feeling, though I tried — and now when I should ask it of him — he cannot forgive me."

Mrs. Wayne did not appear altogether astonished. "And yet I think he understood that you would marry him when he came back."

THE RIGHT MAN

"I made him an implied promise — and I would have kept it. I am glad I did so now."

"It would have been difficult? Still, you loved him once."

Violet turned her eyes away, and once more seemed to shiver. "No," she said with a little quaver in her voice. "I seem to have realized since he went away that I never did. Still, until Nettie Harding told me, I fancied I did — and I believed in him. He was so generous, and light-hearted — and, though I am wickedly exacting, I am not hard all through. I can't shake off the horror I feel because I am not more sorry now."

Mrs. Wayne bent down and kissed her again. "My dear, I do not think the right man would find you hard," she said. "Still, I am afraid you will die single. You expect too much."

Appleby, who saw Violet and her mother twice before the week was out, found that the negotiations for an extension of building sites and water rights at Dane Cop which Craythorne had undertaken would delay him another week. The lawyer had urged him to wait in London, and pointed out the risk of recognition or an encounter with Sergeant Stitt; but Colonel Melton lived at a distance of several miles from Northrop, and Appleby for no very apparent reason preferred that vicinity. Then when the affair was decided, and there was nothing to delay his sailing for New York, he set out on foot on a farewell visit to Mrs. Wayne's house, and, as it happened, did not find her or her daughter in. He went on to Low Wood, and discovering that Hester Earle half expected Violet spent an hour there in fierce impatience. The afternoon was rapidly wearing through, and as he had taken his passage by the "Cunarder" to sail from Liverpool on the following day it was essential that he should leave Darsley that night.

Still, Violet did not come, and he was proceeding ruefully towards Colonel Melton's when he overtook her walking home. The light was growing dim, but he almost fancied that she started when she saw him. Her voice was, however, as quiet and low as usual when she greeted him.

"I am very glad I met you, because I could not find you at home, and I am going away to-night," he said.

There was the slightest trace of astonishment and concern

THE DUST OF CONFLICT

in the girl's eyes. "Then you will come back with me," she said.

"I'm afraid I can't," said Appleby, with a glance at his watch. "Still, with your permission, I will walk a little of the way with you."

They went on together, and it was not because they desired it that Tony Palliser held a leading place in their thoughts, and twice at least Appleby mentioned him. Then the girl said slowly, "I have heard from Mr. Earle that you do not mean to clear yourself. That is very generous but — one must mention it — is it wise?"

Appleby showed a trace of disconcertion. "I do not know why he told you, but as I shall, I think, spend most of my life in America it could do me little good to vindicate myself," he said. "Only a few people know the truth, and they will keep my confidence, while the rest would not believe it. Tony made reparation for the wrong he did me, and if he had not risked the cazador's bayonet I do not think I should be here now."

"Still, did it never occur to you that you might marry?"

Appleby stopped without intending it, and both stood still. The saffron and green of the sunset was shining low down between the bare branches of a copse close by, and there was still a little light in the sky, and the man, lifting his eyes, looked at his companion. It was evident that she had spoken without reflection and was sorry for it, for he could see a tinge of color in her face, but it was the vague apprehension in her eyes that seized his attention. For a moment he stood silent, and felt his heart beating. Then an impulse which rose from the depth of his nature swept restraint away.

"Yes," he said almost grimly. "Still, that may never happen. I have too great aspirations, you see — and if it ever came about the woman would understand my motives."

"Then you have seen her — she is not a fancy?"

Violet had not meant to say this, but the words seemed forced on her, and it was almost with a sense of confusion she realized that they had escaped her. Still, she stood looking at the man quietly, and saw the little quiver that ran through him. Then it was with a strenuous effort she preserved her tranquillity, for she knew.

"Yes," he said in a strained voice, "I have seen her. Her

THE RIGHT MAN

face was with me on many a weary march in Cuba — though I tried to drive it away."

The color was a trifle more evident in the girl's cheeks. "You found it difficult? But would not the stain of an offence you did not commit prove an insuperable barrier?"

"No," said Appleby with a quietness that cost him an effort, "I do not think it would. The story would not be known in America."

There was silence for a space, and while both stood very still the truth was plain between them. Then it was the girl who spoke.

"You have great faith," she said.

Appleby made a little forceful gesture. "It is warranted," he said. "I am going away to-morrow. You know why it is necessary — but if I come back again will you listen to what I shall have to tell you?"

Violet Wayne regarded him with eyes that shone softly.

"Yes," she said very quietly.

Then with a grasp of her hand Appleby turned away, and Violet went on slowly down the dusky lane.

THE END

